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COLORADO RUBE, THE STRONG ARM OF HOTSPUR CITY; Or, THE GIANT BROTHERS OF BUZZARD'S ROOST.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "THE GOLD DRAGON," ETC., ETC.



JUST AS COLORADO RUBE REACHED THE MIDDLE OF THE GREAT RIFT, THE LASSO CAME CIRCLING TOWARD HIS HEAD.

Colorado Rube,

The Strong Arm of Hotspur City;

OR,

The Giant Brothers of Buzzard's Roost.

BY WM. H. MANNING,

AUTHOR OF "THE GOLD DRAGON," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LEAGUE OF BUZZARD'S ROOST.

"VENGEANCE shall be mine! Hotspur City has sowed ther wind, an' she shall reap ther whirlwind ter her sorer. I've been deceived, played with, an' ef I b'ar it, may I die like a dog. I'll rally ther boyees, an' I'll make Colorado Rube an' his gang repent ther day they sot down on Bill Buzzard!"

It was the voice of an angry man, a voice thick with passion, and the speaker's face was distorted by a scowl which made it a network of ugly lines.

He was a man who stood six feet in his boots, with corresponding proportions. His shoulders were thick and broad, his chest rounded like the side of a drum, his arms long and powerful, and his whole appearance recalled the story of Samson's prowess.

But he was by no means a handsome man. His face was irregular, coarse, brutal, but strong; a short, jet-black beard covered his face; his eyebrows seemed the work of ink, so dark were they; and coarse, straight black hair hung all around his head.

It was an evil face in every way, and when such a man swears vengeance, one may be sure no sentiment of honor will stand between him and the desired consummation.

This man, striding along a mountain trail, with his fingers playing nervously with the breech of the rifle he carried on his shoulder, was not such a companion as any timid person would care to have.

The scene was in Colorado, where the foothills of the Rocky Mountains slope away toward the Gunnison valley. A mile away was the town of Hotspur City, a prosperous place, where men were doing a good deal of gold-finding, but the face of the traveler was toward a peak which lay to the northwest of the gold town.

Sugar-Loaf Hill, the peak was called, and on its top was Bill Buzzard's home. Few men knew much about it, for, ever since gold-seekers came to the place, the Buzzard brothers had claimed all Sugar-Loaf and stood ready to maintain their claim at the rifle's muzzle.

Four stalwart brothers they were—Bill, Jack, Tom and Dave—and though no rupture had ever occurred between them and the other people, it was because they were feared and allowed to have their own way.

So far, they had not been particularly bad citizens. No lawless deed had been traced to their door, but had the earth opened and buried Sugar-Loaf and its self-styled owners forever from sight, there would have been rejoicing in the village.

Of late there had been mutterings of a storm. Once the Buzzard brothers had a sister who kept their house in order—Buzzard's Roost, it was called—but among the miners who came to Hotspur City was a dashing young man named Rube Ralston. He had met Mona Buzzard by accident, and love had at once sprung up in each heart.

Ultimately they married, despite the loud disapproval of the brothers, who had sworn to kill Colorado Rube, as the husband was called, and though no hostile act had yet occurred, people daily expected it and wondered at Rube's rashness in remaining near his revengeful relatives.

Unknown to the citizens, the cloud hung huge and dark on this day when Bill Buzzard was hurrying across the mountain, his face like that of a maddened tiger.

He reached the base of Sugar-Loaf, but his strong limbs seemed tireless and he went up rapidly. Almost at the very top, half-concealed by trees, was the house which people called the "Roost."

Bill knew he would find his brothers in at that hour and, striding to the door, he flung it open and entered.

Jack, Tom and Dave were there, engaged in eating their supper. All were like him in physical proportions, and, with the exception of Dave, all had the same swarthy complexion. The youngest was lighter, and his face was handsomer and less sinister, but if he was better at heart, Hotspur City had never discovered the fact.

The trio looked up indifferently as Bill entered, but when the breech of his rifle dropped to the floor with a resounding thump, they knew something unusual had disturbed the mind of their amiable relative.

"What's ther matter?" growled Jack.

"Ther matter is, we're played fur fools!" answered the eldest brother, in a terrible voice.

Each one of the trio laid his hand on his knife.

"Who has did it?" demanded Tom.

"Listen ter me!" answered Bill. "We had a sister onc't, didn't we?"

"Yas."

It was Dave who answered.

"And she fell in love with a durned galoot we all hated, an' married him spite o' all we c'u'd say, didn't she?"

"Yas."

"That galoot was Colorado Rube, an' we hev sworn ter hev his life fur stealin' Mona. Ain't I right?"

"Right ter a dot," answered Tom, scowling.

"A week ago thar was an election o' mayor in Hotspur City, an' ther thing resulted in a tie-vote between old Cy Mumford an' Pete Rosseau. We knowed that our affairs was one o' ther issues o' ther campaign, an' that Rosseau and his gang was in favor o' deprivin' us o' Sugar-Loaf, but we didn't car' a durn, an' we didn't go nigh 'em ter cast a vote, did we? Wal, what then?"

"Then ole Mumford come hyar an' asked fur our votes, promisin' that his party would declare our rights ter hold Sugar-Loaf," said Jack.

"Yas, an' I answered that we didn't keer a durn; that Sugar-Loaf was ourn, that we'd hold it ag'in' all Hotspur City, an' that we wouldn't vote with ther town. What did he answer? That the man who stole our sister, that sneakin' Colorado Rube, was fur Rosseau, an' that ef that party won, it would be a triumph o' Rube over us. What did I answer?"

"You put your hand in his'n an' swore you would go ag'in' Rube Ralston in any, an' all, schemes, an' then we went ter Hotspur an' voted, an' our four votes put in ole Mumford ez mayor by jest four majority."

"Jest so. Wal, what d'ye s'pose I l'arned ter-day?"

"What?"

"I repeat, we've been played fur fools. Colorado Rube is ter be Mumford's clerk, an' that shows ther hull game bare. Ralston was never fur Rosseau; Mumford told ther lie, which was prob'ly hatched by Rube, ter rope us in, an' we've not only been played fur fools, but we've gi'n ther man we hate ther best office in Hotspur—ther best, 'cause Mumford is so old an' feeble, Ralston will be ther real mayor o' ther town, an' he'll grow rich off o' what our votes gi'n him!"

Bill Buzzard hissed the words through his teeth, his face the personification of rage, and his stalwart brothers sat like men of stone. They hated Rube Ralston as much as he did, and the idea that they had thus helped him was a most bitter pill to swallow.

"Why don't ye speak?" shouted the elder brother.

Jack Buzzard arose, drew his revolver and stretched it out as though aiming at a foe.

"When I speak, it'll be with this!" he answered.

Tom and Dave echoed the words.

"Good!" exclaimed Bill. "I see thar is no reason ter doubt your 'sand.' Up with your hands, an' sw'ar vengeance on Colorado Rube!"

Four long, powerful right arms were raised and the brothers spoke in concert:

"We swear!"

"Good, ag'in! Now, hear my plan. This evenin' ole Mumford is ter take the oath o' office, an' we'll be thar ter see ther mummery. We'll go armed ter ther teeth, an' we'll make our mark in a way Hotspur City won't forgit. No man kin cheat Bill Buzzard an' live. We'll go, an' we'll wipe out three vipers: Mumford, Colorado Rube an' ther sister who deserted her own flesh-and-blood fur sech a craven ez him."

"Not Mona!"

It was Dave Buzzard who spoke, and he faced his eldest brother with a firm countenance.

"Why not her?"

"She is our sister."

"She's no sister o' mine!" Bill declared.

"She's mine," Dave answered, "an' she will be ez long ez she lives. We've cast her off, an' rightfully, too; but she was a good sister ter us afore that reptyle stole her away. For ther sake o' old times, I say she sha'n't die!"

Bill Buzzard, with his thirty years of life, had been in the habit of looking down upon the brother who was but twenty-two, but he saw at that moment that Dave had a will as strong as his own.

"Be you chicken-hearted?" he sneered.

"Ther man who says I am, shall fight me!" retorted Dave belligerently. "Don't be a fool, Bill. I favor killin' ther men, an' I ask nothin' better than ter be ther man ter carve Rube Ralston; but Mona must be spared."

"He's right," said Jack. "Leave alone ther woman who was once our sister."

"That's right an' proper," coincided Tom.

"Have it so, then," said Bill, after a pause; "but Rube an' Mumford die. Ther Mayor o' Hotspur won't be either o' them. Get ready yer weepens, boyees, an' we'll be thar at ther sw'arin'-in. Oh! it'll be a merry inauguration!"

He laughed harshly, and his brothers joined like a chorus. All their slumbering hatred had been freshly aroused, and to it was added a cut

to their pride as they thought that they had been outwitted and deceived.

Woe to Hotspur city when their red hands fingered the six-shooters and the knives.

From that moment the cabin became a scene of activity. Each man drew the cartridges from his revolvers and began cleaning them, for they wished to have all in order for the grand man-hunt. They felt no pity whatever for the men they had marked for death, and if they had their way, the night would be the darkest in the history of the mountain town.

Just at twilight they went out, set their faces toward the town, and began to descend the rough side of Sugar-Loaf. Few words were spoken, but it was because their thoughts were too deep for words.

Led by Bill Buzzard, the would-be assassins were going forth like hungry tigers to the unsuspecting town, and the last sun-rays, touching the peak, threw shadows no darker than those in their hearts.

CHAPTER II.

THE GIANT BROTHERS VISIT HOTSPUR CITY.

HOTSPUR CITY had taken the initial step toward becoming a place of substantial importance. Like nearly all young places it was ambitious, and as there was a tendency of gold interest toward "the Gunnison," it was confidently predicted that Hotspur City would yet have a reputation rivaling that of Deadwood and Leadville.

Consequently, the citizens thought there ought to be a mayor, and one was elected. As we have already seen, the first vote resulted in a tie, but when Cyrus Mumford was finally elected, all, including the defeated candidate, joined hands in contributing to the success of his term of office.

This harmony was largely brought about by one Reuben Ralston, more familiarly known as Colorado Rube, who possessed great influence, and, though at first a supporter of Rosseau, had brought the defeated party into the fold of peace in a way more celebrated politicians would do well to imitate.

It was Hotspur City's fancy to celebrate the election of their mayor by a social event of importance, and it was agreed that there should be a formal taking of the oath of office, and a general jollification.

This event was set for the evening of the day on which our story opens.

Near the center of the town was a small, neat cottage owned by Rube Ralston before mentioned. At about the same time the Buzzard brothers were starting from the summit of Sugar-Loaf, Ralston and his family were sitting down to supper.

Ralston was a man of about twenty-six years, but he looked older, despite the jaunty, dashing air which seemed a part of his nature. He was good-looking, in a manly way, with a well-poised head around which clustered short, black curls, while a heavy mustache covered his lip; and though there was a frank, good-humored, laughing look about his face and eyes, there was a nameless something which suggested an iron will and unwavering courage when he was aroused. He lacked two inches of being six feet, but his form was robust and well-rounded, indicating an abundance of muscle.

His wife was the sister of the Buzzard brothers, but what a contrast! While they were giants, she was a little woman who seemed, at first sight, as inoffensive as a kitten, and one look at her sunny, happy face would convince an observer she was of a noble nature; but she was not wholly devoid of the Buzzard peculiarities.

In the nimble, active movements, the quick glance of her jet-black eyes, one could see, as in the case of her husband, signs of a volcano which might make trouble if aroused.

Properly speaking, Colorado Rube's family ended here, but on this occasion they had a guest at supper.

This was Zetta Willis, who was the niece of Mayor-elect Mumford. At ten o'clock there was going to be a grand supper at the Old Rye Hotel, given by Mr. Mumford, but it was to be served by Landlord Chipp, and Zetta was spending the intervening hours with her friend, Mrs. Ralston.

She was a pretty girl of twenty years, a blonde, and of a retiring nature, but those who knew her liked her well.

"Do you realize the solemnity of this occasion?" Ralston asked, laughing. "Just at present we live in an obscure mining town; before we sleep, it will be the celebrated municipality—of what, deponent sayeth not—called Hotspur City!"

"And you, Mr. Ralston," added Zetta, in the same mood, "will be next unto the king himself. Mona, are you not proud of the honors thus accumulating?"

The sunny face of Mrs. Ralston clouded.

"I suppose you will laugh at me, but I am not pleased, whether I am proud or not. I have a presentiment that trouble will come of it."

Colorado Rube laughed lightly.

"Nihilists and dynamiters will scarcely take notice of the mayor and chief clerk of this Colorado town."

Mrs. Ralston did not answer, and both her companions rallied her for a few minutes concerning her grave manner. Her husband, however, was neither blind nor indifferent.

"Mona," he suddenly said, after studying her face, "you have a well-defined fear. What is it?"

Mrs. Ralston hesitated, glanced at Zetta and replied:

"You will remember that I told you, even before we were married, that there would be no real safety for us near Sugar-Loaf; that we must go beyond the knowledge of my brothers to be safe from the hatred we knew they felt for us."

Ralston's lips closed tightly while she spoke, but, while he did not make light of the matter, it was clear he was not alarmed.

"I am aware that your brothers felt bitterly toward me, but, now that overtures toward peace on my part have failed, we must protect ourselves. I do not think they will interfere with us, however."

The speaker was conscious of telling a falsehood, while he spoke. If Mona had a vague suspicion, he had a well-defined fear in the case. He knew the Buzzard brothers had cast their votes for Cyrus Mumford because he—Reuben Ralston—had been in favor of the rival candidate. That the giants of Sugar-Loaf would hear of the new alliance, which made Colorado Rube second in power at the town, with equanimity, did not seem probable.

For himself Ralston had no fear, but to-night he was just a little sorry he had kept his wife near her vengeful relatives.

The temporary gloom was dissipated by the entrance, without ceremony of a fourth person. He was a man of fifty years, six feet in height, and both slenderly and awkwardly built, while upon his ungainly form he boasted a suit of clothes which hung so loosely that a second man might almost have found quarters in them.

He had a homely face, with small, light-blue eyes, an exceedingly long nose, and a beard which was independent enough to grow in spots like solitary trees scattered here and there on a prairie; but it was an honest, good-natured face, and his blue eyes beamed genially on the trio before him.

"Good-evenin', one an' all. I see that Hotspur City has gathered here 'her beauty an' her chivalry,' ez Socrates used fer ter say."

"The chivalry is certainly here, now you have arrived, Mr. Mullin," answered Mrs. Ralston.

"You do me proud, but draw it light. 'We are prone ter vanity ez ther sparks do upward flit,' ter quote Socrates ag'in; so draw it light, an' not make me vain."

"You never forget your friend Socrates, do you?"

"He was a man well worth knowin'—a philosopher o' a stamp we seldom see. Ter quote his own words: 'We shall never see his like ag'in.' Yes, feller-citizens, Socrates an' me was fast friends; our intimacy war ther brightest spot o' my childhood. But, ter business: I hev a'p'inted myself a committee o' one ter escort you ter ther beforum o' justice, fur ter see ther mayor-select swear."

"We will get ready at once."

They proceeded to do so, and the party took its way to the center of interest.

Hotspur City had just finished a somewhat pretentious building, which was to be the temple of justice, and to which they had given the name of Independence Hall.

Every one was going that way at the hour when our friends from Ralston's house also started, and men, women and children were wrapped up in the forthcoming event. Brawny miners had laid aside the pick and forgotten business cares; men who had been foes had shaken hands and drank together over Elbridge Brown's bar; peace and good-will reigned supreme in the village.

Cyrus Mumford, the mayor-elect, was already at the hall and talking with the defeated candidate. He was a man well advanced in years, with snow-white beard and hair; a genial, impressive and dignified air, together with the marks of a gentleman; but a close observer would have seen that his face was not a strong one. On the contrary, he gave evidence of a somewhat weak, vacillating nature.

Even a casual observer would have seen that he did not possess bodily strength. His limbs had lost their power, his hands trembled, and the flesh hung loosely on his cheeks.

There were those who had at first declared such a man was not fit to rule Hotspur City, but he was president of the newly-established bank, half-owner of a mine, a friend of Denver and New York capitalists, and those who urged him for the office did so because of the dignity, respectability and weight he would bring to it.

He was conscious of his own bodily infirmities, and he at first refused to allow the use of his name, but he had been over-persuaded, the election had taken place, and in half an hour, Providence permitting, he would be the first, and the legal, mayor of Hotspur City.

A platform had been erected at one end of the hall, and on this the principal men of the

town were soon congregated. The number included, besides Mumford, Ralston, Rosseau and others. Nearly all were young excepting the mayor-elect, and as the latter sat among them he looked patriarchal and well fitted for the head of justice.

When the appointed hour had arrived, Colorado Rube arose and rapped on the table for silence.

"Fellow-citizens," he briefly said, "we are now about to take the last step toward making our town a city in fact, as well as in name. By the taking of the oath of office Cyrus Mumford becomes our mayor, and I am sure he goes into office with the good will of all. Permit me to say, in behalf of the committee, that we thank you for your good will, and hope peace and prosperity will always abide in Hotspur City."

Applause seemed necessary, and it was given. Then Cyrus Mumford and the Reverend Mr. Wolff moved forward and a breathless silence followed. All were interested in the taking of the oath.

But, as the two men stood side by side, with a Bible held between them, a harsh voice broke the silence:

"Hold! I'm hyar ter take part in ther business, an' I'll shoot ther first man who yells. Hands up!"

CHAPTER III.

THE BUZZARD BROTHERS SHOW THEIR TEETH.

It was a startling interruption to the peaceful scene, and in a moment more Bill Buzzard and his three gigantic brothers strode down the aisle, only stopping when they had reached the platform.

Each man held two cocked revolvers, and as Tom and Jack wheeled about so as to face the audience, the whole house was under their eyes.

There was a deathlike silence, and then a deep breath arose from the citizens. To know the full effect of the interruption, the standing of the Buzzard brothers must be clearly understood.

As has been said before, no crime had ever been traced to their door, but they were the terror of Hotspur City. Men knew they were vicious, revengeful and remorseless, and while women and children shivered at the sound of their names, there were not three men in the city who would have dared meet any one of them in fight.

They were practical outlaws. True, they came to Hotspur and traded at the stores, but they never addressed any one unnecessarily, and were themselves unaddressed. Men shunned and feared them. Had it been asserted that their hearts were flint-rock, or that the blood which flowed in their veins was jet-black, many would have believed it.

Had four ordinary men entered the hall to interrupt the proceedings they would have been quickly ejected; but the coming of the giant brothers was like that of a regiment of soldiers. Hotspur City felt outnumbered and cowed.

"You kin hold on right whar ye be," continued Bill Buzzard, in a deep, menacing voice. "Hotspur City won't have no mayor ter-night; leastwise, not that old liar who stands a-quakin' thar."

Cyrus Mumford was "quaking." He was not a brave man, and had four tigers been let loose upon him, it would scarcely have alarmed him more than did the coming of the Buzzards.

Among the other startled persons was Mrs. Ralston. She, too, feared her lawless brothers, though in a different way from the majority of the people, and, meeting the glare of Dave's fierce eyes, she shrunk back against Zetta Willis.

Only one in the hall remained calm. Colorado Rube had lived a rough, adventurous life for ten years; he had never known what fear was, and at his present age he was a man of remarkable courage, shrewdness and natural diplomatic skill.

He advanced to the front of the stage and confronted Bill Buzzard with a face that expressed neither fear, harshness nor feigned surprise.

"What is the matter, Bill?" he eagerly asked.

"Ther matter is that we've come ter yer funeral," was the grim reply. "We cast our votes in ther election, an' I reckon we hev a right ter be hyar; but we ain't come ter sing jubilees nor songs o' peace. We've come ter make ther holiday o' Hotspur City a funeral, an' you, Rube Ralston, are ter be one o' ther dead!"

There was no facetiousness in the speaker's voice, and no disposition to play with his intended victim; his heavy tones had a startling vindictiveness and resolution.

But Colorado Rube remained as calm as ever.

"If you have a cause for complaint, we shall be glad to hear it," he steadily answered.

"Ef I hev a cause fur complaint—ef I hes! Ain't I? Is it nothin' ter be played fur a fool, ter be lied ter an' used as a cat's-paw? Some people might b'ar it, but when you play ther roots on Bill Buzzard, blood has got ter flow!"

The ominous threat rung out through the hall like the swelling note of an organ.

Still, Ralston remained calm.

"In what way have you been deceived?" he asked.

"I've been lied to—I've been played for a fool ter git my vote fur that Judas thar. Don't yer flatter yerselves. I don't understand ther game. Thar war a tie vote in ther town. Somebody thought o' Bill Buzzard and his brothers, an' knew ther ballots would turn ther scale. But they had refused ter vote. How could they be prevailed on? You, Rube Ralston, thought o' a way. You said ter old Mumford: 'Go ter them an' say I am fur Rosseau, an' they'll vote fur you.' He did it; ther trap worked; we voted an' Mumford became ther man. Ye was cunnin', Colorado Rube, but ye has throwed off the mask too soon. Ther moment you showed up ez Mumford's chief clerk, ther game was bare. You was fur him all ther while."

Bill Buzzard poured forth his accusation rapidly, his face full of fury, but Ralston did not waver for a moment.

"Your suspicion is incorrect and unjust, as would have been explained to you before had you not told Mumford, when he visited you, that the next man you found on Sugar-Loaf should die. For that reason, we kept away."

"It's wal you did!" declared Bill.

"You shall now hear the truth. I was for Rosseau. Mr. Mumford I respected and liked, but Rosseau was my personal friend, and he had promised me a good position under him. I made no suggestions to Mumford, nor did I know he had gone to the Roost until after the second casting of votes. When the matter was decided, however, it was agreed to settle everything amicably, and Mumford came to me, as Rosseau's right bower, and offered me the position of chief clerk. I accepted it. That is the whole story of a transaction in which there was no deception whatever."

"A lie!" shouted Bill Buzzard. "You want ter blind me ag'in, but it can't be did. You've sowed, and you've got ter reap."

"I am ready to support my statement by the word of Mr. Mumford, or that of Rosseau, or—"

"You needn't go any fuder, fur I hev no doubt you've got it all cut an' dried. But it won't work. The cat is out o' ther bag, an' you've got ter pay ther fiddler. You've fooled Bill Buzzard, an' he's come fur revenge. Men o' Hotspur City, I ain't got no quarrel with you, but I'm hyar ter kill Cy Mumford an' Rube Ralston, an' ther streets o' ther city shall swim with gore ef any o' you lifts yer hands fur them!"

The eldest Buzzard turned a glare upon the audience which made many of them cower, but a hand was suddenly, but lightly, laid on his arm.

He wheeled abruptly.

His sister, the wife of Colorado Rube, stood before him.

The desperado raised his hand, as though to strike her, but she met his angry glare unwaveringly and his hand fell to his side.

"Brother," she said, steadily, "think twice before you proceed to extremities."

"I've thought a'ready," he growled.

"William, I am your sister, and the man you threaten to kill is my husband. For my sake, for the sake of the score of years I lived with you, and tried to be kind and faithful to you, listen to the voice of reason and do nothing rash."

"Ther voice o' reason!" he sneered. "Did you listen ter it when you married a sneak you knew I hated? From ther first time I saw Ralston, I was his enemy. He came to Sugar-Loaf like a serpent an' bewitched you with his oily words. I warned him away. Then he met ye in secret until he finally married ye. D'ye think I'll forgive ther dog? Never! I'll have his life, an' ef you don't go I'll have yours, too."

Colorado Rube stood on the platform and watched this interview with a gaze which never wandered. He was still calm, outwardly, but there was a tense look about his mouth which told that the tiger was arousing, and that it needed but one indignity to his wife to make him hurl himself like a tiger upon Bill Buzzard.

"William," continued Mrs. Ralston, evenly, "did I ever demand that you abandon a wish which was to your happiness?"

"It makes no difference whether you hev or not; when I said I hated Ralston, that should have been enough. But that's nyther hyar nor thar. You are no longer my sister, an' I won't listen to yer palaverin'. Clear out!"

"Brother—"

He caught her arm in a cruel grasp.

"Away!" he hotly exclaimed. "Git out o' my sight, or I'll crush ye ez I would an adder!"

He made a motion to haul her aside, but there was a light bound and his arm was caught in time.

"Stop!" said a steel-like, penetrating voice.

He turned, slowly, because he knew who was there, and met the gaze of Colorado Rube. Plainly, it needed but one step more to fully arouse the slumbering tiger in the younger

man's breast. His face was calm, but there was a light in his eyes Bill Buzzard did not fail to read.

The desperado doubled his fist, and then slowly unclosed it. The other hand, too, fell away from Mrs. Ralston's arm.

"Take her away ez soon ez you please," he said. "I want nothin' on her."

"I will not go!" the brave little woman answered. "My place is here."

But Colorado Rube whispered in her ear, and then with gentle force led her away. What he said no other person heard, but she obeyed his wishes.

Bill Buzzard looked after them, and once more drew the revolvers from his belt, but he made no motion to use them. He only watched to see that Ralston did not attempt flight.

The lull was broken by the advance of another person, and Makepeace Mullin saluted Bill in military style.

"Ef it won't seem brash in me ter chip in," he mildly said, "I would like ter observe that 'tis ter our common int'rest ter heal this factional emeute. No good ever comes o' quarrels. D'ye remember what Socrates, who was ther wisest man that ever lived, said? 'Let cats an' dogs delight ter bite an' scratch,' says Socrates, 'but human beings wa'n't made ter cut an' slay.' I would respectfully submit ter yer kind consideration—"

Up to this time Bill Buzzard had stood like a statue, trying to frighten Makepeace with his tigerish look, but the alleged quotation from Socrates flowed serenely. Suddenly, however, Bill raised his hand, and Mullin disappeared like a flash. He had not been struck, but he had retreated with a flying leap.

Bill Buzzard threw up his revolver, cocking it as he did so.

"I'm hyar fer revenge!" he shouted, "an' I'll wait no longer. Die, Colorado Rube; die like ther dog you are!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE GUESTS AT THE OLD RYE.

THREE hours before the citizens met at Independence Hall, the stage from Rattlesnake Run drew up in front of the Old Rye Hotel, and two passengers alighted. One, a man, descended from the driver's seat, looked carelessly around in the gathering twilight, and entered the hotel.

The second, a lady, came from the interior of the vehicle, and also passed into the Old Rye.

On the register their names were entered thus:

"Mildred Fenton, Lincoln, Nebraska."

"John Broderick, Bumblebee, Arizona."

If the two felt any interest in each other, they did not show it by so much as a glance, and coming from points so wide apart, it seemed very possible that not a word had ever passed between them.

Miss Fenton said she was very weary, and would go to her room at once. She did so.

Mr. Broderick said he thought he would take a stroll and look at the town. He did so.

Shortly after, a horseman arrived, stabled his horse and entered the office. He was a young man, less than twenty-five, and rather good-looking and attractive, but he bore an expression half-gloomy and half-crabbed; and one old bummer who took the trouble to study him to see if he could be struck for a drink, observed to a neighbor that he looked as though he was in a mood for suicide.

The young man looked at the register, read the names last written, and frowned. He was turning away when Landlord Chipp spoke.

"I would like your name there, stranger."

The young man scowled.

"Why don't you ask for the earth?" he demanded.

"Because I don't want it—not even six feet of it," genially answered Chipp. "It is customary, however, to have the names and residences of guests."

The young man took the pen, dashed off a name, hesitated, and then scrawled something more in the space devoted to "residences." When he turned away the landlord read:

"NEAL BISHOP, the Earth."

The entry was far from definite, but Mr. Chipp did not think of remonstrating. He had many curiosities in that register; facetious men, men with secrets to hide, and others had left their marks; and many who had never been outside the United States claimed residence at London, Paris, Jerusalem, Ujiji, or wherever their eccentric fancy prompted them to write themselves as being from.

Neal Bishop sat down and did not leave his chair for an hour. Then John Broderick returned.

The latter had seen over thirty years of life. He was a tall, rather angular-looking man, with straight black hair and a black mustache, which drooped over his mouth. He had a long, crescent-shaped nose, which gave him a kind of hawk-like appearance, and, while he had the outward marks of a gentleman, his face was far from being a prepossessing one.

As soon as Bishop saw him he arose, and the two men stood facing each other. Broderick

had started, and a look of annoyance flitted over his face, but it was gone in a moment.

"I want to see you," said Bishop, abruptly.

"I am going to my room at once. You can accompany me if you wish."

Broderick spoke calmly and turned away at the last word. He went up-stairs without looking around, and the younger man followed. Not a word was spoken. They entered a chamber, Broderick started a light, sat down, lit a cigar, and then looked composedly at his companion, who had slowly taken a chair at the other side of the table.

"Did you say you wanted to see me?" he carelessly asked.

"Yes," answered Bishop, vehemently. "I want to know what new villainy you are contemplating."

"My dear sir—what is your name now?"

"Neal Bishop."

"Bishop? Ha! ha! very good. Take 'Parson' and 'Deacon' next. Well, Bishop, I don't see as it is any of your business what my business is."

"It is! So long as my sister follows your evil fortunes, it is my business. You drag her down, step by step—"

"By means of long argument, eh?"

"Would to Heaven it were so. No; I confess she is unprincipled enough to aid in whatever you suggest, but there might be a hope for her if you were dead."

"You possess a revolver."

"I do, but I am no assassin."

"Ha! ha! No; you are a man of most immaculate character; all who know you will testify to that. If I wanted a disciple of true honor I'd take you, Walters, Gray, Bishop—hang it! you have so many aliases I can't always get the true one."

Broderick had elevated one foot on the table and, nonchalantly puffing his cigar, he eyed Bishop with all the careless coolness imaginable. The latter, on the contrary, was nervous, angry, and, plainly, wretched, and his voice was husky from emotions he with difficulty repressed.

John Broderick was his master, and he was playing with him as the cat does with the mouse.

"I am not here to speak of myself," Bishop sullenly said. "I want to know what new plot you have in your mind."

"Suppose I say I have none?"

"It will do no good. I am aware that you have come to Hotspur City with a fixed purpose. Mildred has come as your ally. You propose to introduce her into the household of a man named Reuben Ralston, alias Colorado Rube. What your object is I don't know, but I demand light on the subject."

"Do you imagine that I shall divulge—to you?"

"Mildred is my sister," said Bishop, vehemently, "and it is my right to know what devious game you are leading her into. Who is this Ralston? Why is Mildred to be introduced to his household? What do you hope to gain by it? Is it money, revenge or—"

"For Heaven's sake, get an encyclopedia and look up your conundrums. I am not a riddle-guesser, nor a bureau of information. Why turn the crank when the hand-organ gives forth no music?"

"You shall not play with me thus!" declared Bishop, striking the table with his clenched fist.

"My dear Mr. Bishop, I shall do just as I please, and you can't help yourself."

Broderick blew out a wreath of smoke, yawned lazily and then watched the younger man through half-closed eyes.

"You are a demon!" exclaimed Bishop.

"Thanks!"

"And a villain!"

"Thanks!"

Bishop uttered a groan. He was, in this man's hands, like chaff in the wind. Overmatched in every way, he might beat against the rock but it would always be fruitlessly.

"Dare you call my sister?" he finally asked.

"I do not intend to have it known in town that I am acquainted with her, but, to oblige you, I will," Broderick replied.

He went to the further side of the room and rapped against the wall. There was a brief delay, and then Miss Fenton opened the door and entered. She, too, started at sight of Bishop, and she turned her gaze on Broderick with a startled air, but his calm indifference reassured her.

"Your brother, my dear Mildred," said he, with a wave of his hand. "Your long-lost, dearly-loved, worthy, prodigal brother, whom you have not seen for a month."

There was a resemblance between brother and sister, but her look was one of confidence, boldness, sagacity and, unless her expression belied her, unscrupulousness.

She was a handsome woman, however, and in any place would have found admirers.

"You don't seem glad to see the prodigal, yet he has a word to say to you, I believe."

"So I have," quickly answered Bishop.

"Mildred, I know something of the plans which have brought you to Hotspur City. You intend to enter the house of a man named Ral-

ston by some trick, and that foretells another disgraceful plot—for what? I do not know; it may be money, or revenge, or more. But, Mildred, let me entreat you, as the sister who was a child with me, to turn your back on what you contemplate and live an honorable life."

Miss Fenton laughed musically.

"Mercy! has the man turned parson?" she cried.

"Only a 'Bishop,' with a prefix of Neal," said Broderick. "That is the most exquisite irony I ever heard. Neal Bishop, kneel down—notice the pun, Mildred—and tell us what you know about Red River Run—"

Neal sprung to his feet and drew his revolver with a jerk.

"Stop!" he hissed. "Stop, or, by my life! I'll shoot you like the dog you are!"

Broderick saw there was indeed danger, but he covered his knowledge under an easy retort.

"I shall never pun again. Talk with your sister!"

"It is wholly useless," said Miss Fenton, quickly. "I refuse to be dictated to, or lectured. We have gone over this ground a good many times in the past, and you know you and I can never agree, Phil. Let us drop the conversation."

"And let you go on in your evil course? Never!"

"You are a pretty exponent of honor?" sneered the woman.

"Never mind me. I am a miserable, undone man. All I now hope for is to save you. Who is this Rube Ralston, whom you have designs upon? What has he done that his home—I dare say, a happy one—should be turned to a scene of mourning?—for where you two go you leave a serpentine trail."

"Is that an extract from a play?" carelessly asked Broderick, as he sent out another wreath of smoke.

Bishop strode forward and grasped his arm.

"Cold-blooded villain!" he said, huskily, "let me warn you not to go too far. I have never shed human blood, but if you bring Mildred into the grasp of the law, I'll kill you as I would a wolf!"

"You only need a cage to be a menagerie. A while ago you aspired to kill me as you would a dog. Now it's a wolf; anon, it'll be—"

"As man to man!" finished Bishop, with a burst of fire and power which actually cowed the elder man for a moment.

He laughed uneasily.

"You ought to be on the stage."

"One word to you both, and then I'll go. To a certain degree I am powerless, for you can ruin me if you will, but, rather than see you go too far, I'll risk all and accept ruin. If you betray me as a means of safety, I'll betray you and your game at Hotspur City. Go on with it, if you will; take your false hearts and plotting brains into this Ralston's house; put your plot in motion; but I, too, remain at Hotspur City. I remain, and I shall watch. When you think yourself unseen, I will be looking at you. I will know your secret, and, if it be of a nature I too strongly condemn, I will expose you."

As he went, and unfolded his ultimatum, Broderick formed a conclusion. Bishop must die! He was the brother of his female ally, and for that reason he might live if he would be quiet, but when he came around to interfere in their carefully-laid plots, it was his requiem.

"Just as you say, my dear fellow," he answered, aloud. "Oh! you're going, are you?"

"I am. I'll leave you to digest what I've said, and I advise you to change your plans and let Ralston, whoever he is, alone. You shall not bound an innocent man down. I swear it!" and with these words Bishop abruptly left the room.

"And I," thought Broderick, taking good care Mildred did not read his expression, "swear that I will 'hound' Colorado Rube down, and if you interfere, my young idiot, it will be your death-warrant!"

CHAPTER V.

COLORADO RUBE DEFIES BILL BUZZARD.

THERE was murder in Bill Buzzard's heart when he threw up his revolver, but if he had only known it, there was little chance for him to execute his purpose just then. Colorado Rube, who was a wonderful revolver-shot, had a Smith & Wesson half-concealed by his sleeve and hand, and in a second more he would, by a snap-shot, have sent a bullet through Bill Buzzard's arm—he would not have injured him seriously, for he was Mona's brother.

But some one else was before him.

One of the foremost of the crowd, all of whom had seemed too cowed to raise a hand, leaped forward, and a sharp blow sent the giant's revolver whirling across the platform.

A look of amazement and terrible wrath crossed Bill Buzzard's face; then he swung his brawny fist around and the young man disappeared in the crowd.

He had received a blow which seemed capable of felling an ox.

"That's ther way I sarve all who cross my track!" shouted Buzzard. "That's ther way—"

"You will not serve me!"

The words were quietly spoken at his side,

and he stood glaring into the calm, steady eyes of Colorado Rube.

There was a breathless silence, during which the two men never stirred. Bill towered far above his intended victim, his shoulders were more massive, and he would weigh forty pounds more than he; but nothing could exceed Colorado Rube's coolness. One or two of the most observing spectators, seeing how calm, how alert he was, and noticing that his form, if not gigantic, was ample and well-rounded, began to have an idea that the desperado might not have things all his own way.

Cyrus Mumford was not one of these persons. We have before said he was not a brave man! he had been a coward ever since the Buzzard brothers invaded the hall. He sat on the platform, trembling, but only refraining from calling on the people for protection because he feared the sound of his voice would at once precipitate the terrible quartette upon him.

It was Colorado Rube who broke the pause. "I wish to observe that we can't have bullets flying around here promiscuously. If you have a spite against me, it is no reason why you should kill a dozen helpless women and children."

"Let them keep out o' ther way, then!" growled Bill.

"They will come to this hall whenever they choose, they will remain as long as they choose, and I will kick out the man who interferes with them!"

Had a bombshell exploded in the room it would not have produced more universal amazement. That any man should dare threaten Bill Buzzard seemed past belief; to those who heard, it seemed like an antelope defying a tiger.

No one was more astonished than Bill himself, and for awhile he was speechless, but a deep red color crept into his cheeks that told of a passion which only blood could still. Before he could speak, however, Colorado Rube added:

"One word to you, Bill. I suppose you consider yourself a fighting man?"

"I kin lick any man in Colorado!" the giant asserted.

"Then I have a proposal for your consideration. You say you have come here to be revenged on me. Very good; I am willing to give you satisfaction, since you will not accept the truth—and here is my proposal: I will meet you as man to man, not with revolvers, where I should be on equal terms with you, but with bare hands, muscle to muscle, arm to arm. If you win, I am yours to kill; if I win, you and your brothers shall go away peacefully and forego your revenge. If you are a brave man, you cannot decline this challenge."

Bill laughed loudly. "Why, you little fool, I can lick you with one hand! I'd break you all in pieces!"

"We have a surgeon here who will set all the bones I have broken. Don't let that trouble you. As I said before, if you are a brave man, you'll accept."

"I do accept!" cried Bill, quickly.

Ralston had touched him in his tenderest part. The giant was vain of his great strength; he feared no man in Colorado; and though he had a dim suspicion that he was making a mistake, he could not decline the challenge.

Dave Buzzard had the same doubts.

"This is foolish," he said.

"What's foolish?" Bill demanded.

"This is no way to settle the matter. By the time we've wiped out Ralston, these galoots will have recovered their sand, an' when they do they'll see they're fools ter let four men cow them, an' they'll wade in an' clear ther Roost."

"Let them try it!" flashed Bill. "I've said I'd fight Rube Ralston an' I'll do it; but, Lord! how long will it last? I'll whip him in thirty seconds."

Colorado Rube had walked to where some of the citizens were paying attention to the man who had interfered when Buzzard tried to shoot, and had been knocked down by the desperado. The blow had been a terrific one, dashing out the man's senses in a twinkling, but he was beginning to show signs of returning consciousness.

"Who is he?" Rube asked.

"A stranger ter ther town. He come in, a boss-back, jest at dark, an' put up at the Old Rye."

"Take good care of him, and, if he needs a doctor, do all for him you can and charge the expense to me."

To the reader the man was not so much a stranger. He was Neal Bishop.

Colorado Rube again turned to the Buzzards.

"You say your grudge is only against Cyrus Mumford and myself. Such being the case, you will, of course, agree to have the hall cleared until after our fight. I propose that all leave here except your party, Mumford, myself and three men I may select to stand in the same relationship to me that your brothers will to you."

"It's a durned pile o' ceremony," said Bill, who repented that he had made any delay whatever. "but put it through, put it through!"

Ralston announced the arrangement in a voice audible to all. There was a good deal of

murmuring, for, though the women were glad to go, the men wished to remain and see the battle, but Rube's word was law and they gradually filed out. While they were doing so Rube spoke to his wife and to Makepeace Mullin, separately. What he said no other person heard, but Mrs. Ralston went out quietly, if not contentedly, and Mullin smiled broadly.

In fact, the master spirit had a well-defined plan, and if he could master Bill Buzzard he hoped to save Hotspur City from a tragedy that night. But of those who left the hall, few ever expected to see their champion alive again.

He had retained three stout miners, named Abe Mulvey, Nick Anderson and Josiah Wise, and though they were really afraid of the giant brothers, they intended to face the danger like men.

"I now propose," said Colorado Rube, "that you and I, Bill, settle our affair on the platform, and that the others give us ample elbow-room. More than that, I propose that every revolver possessed by the crowd be laid on yonder table, and that the non-combatants retire an equal distance from it."

"Have yer own way!" almost roared Bill; "but do, fur ther Lord's sake, git down ter business some time ter-night. Ef you think you kin fool around forever with me, you're infernally mistaken, that's all!"

"I have no desire to 'fool around' with you, and I'll let you at me in a moment."

"I'll knock you stiffer than that galoot they jest kerried out."

Neal Bishop, the man to whom he referred, was at that moment just recovering his senses. He had been carried to the street, and the fresh air soon sufficed to revive him.

He sat up, and put his hand to his head in an uncertain way.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"You run ag'in' a rock," an old miner grimly answered.

"I remember. I interfered to prevent a murder. What was the name of that man?—I heard it but indistinctly."

"Bill Buzzard."

"No, no; the other one."

"Colorado Rube?"

"What is his other name?"

"Ralston."

"It is the same!" muttered Bishop.

"What did ye say, stranger?"

"I asked how the quarrel ended?"

"It ain't ended yet. They're shut up thar, an' they're goin' ter fight ter ther death."

Bishop abruptly arose.

"Give me my revolver. I'll go in!"

"No, ye can't. Spectators ain't allowed; it's ter be a private game o' throat-cuttin'."

At this moment Mrs. Ralston approached. She had been one of the first to render aid to Bishop after he was struck down, and her heart warmed to the man who had suffered in trying to aid her husband.

"Are you badly hurt?" she kindly asked.

Neal laughed shortly.

"I don't know, and it don't make any difference one way or the other. 'Life's but an empty shadow,' at the best."

"I am Mrs. Ralston, and I wish to say we are very grateful to you for interfering as you did, and we shall be sorry if you have received any injury which will cause you trouble."

Bishop looked at her in silence. Mrs. Ralston! She little suspected what an interest the simple announcement caused in his mind. So this was the mistress of the home against which John Broderick had his mysterious designs. He looked at her keenly, and he was enough of a student of human nature to read her character with considerable exactness.

"I think you are a stranger in Hotspur City," the little woman resumed, "and, as such, we offer you the hospitality of our home. Mr. Ralston will be pleased to have it so."

Bishop started as though he had received a blow; this kindness from her touched him more than Bill Buzzard's fist had done.

"No!" he said, curtly. "I must decline. You're making too much of a trifle, and I'll bid you good-night."

And he turned and hurried away, jostling the crowd fiercely.

CHAPTER VI.

MAKEPEACE MULLIN WINS A POINT.

ALL was ready for the fight between Colorado Rube and Bill Buzzard. The platform had been cleared and devoted to the use of the contestants. The three "seconds" of each stood in their respective places, not far away. Cyrus Mumford had taken a chair somewhat apart from all. He had been gradually gaining composure until no one would any longer have said from his outward appearance that he was a coward, but it was only a mask; he expected to see Rube Ralston easily defeated and the Buzzards triumphant.

That meant death to him.

A short distance from the platform stood a table which was covered with a large, red cloth. This was a part of the paraphernalia of justice, but on the present occasion it

looked like anything else. A dozen revolvers lay on the cloth, and it seemed probable when they were taken up, it would be to send death and destruction through the hall.

"Come, now," said Bill Buzzard, "we've had enough o' do-nothingism."

"Just my idea," answered Ralston, coolly.

"You've been doing a good deal of blowing, and now we'll see if you really have any 'sand' and science."

Bill stared in stupid amazement for a moment, and then his dark face turned that deep red before mentioned. He was a mad man, but as he had already decided to kill Ralston, there was no threat of personal violence which seemed lying around loose for him to make.

"We'll see!" he growled.

"Just what we want to see," said Rube, lightly.

He removed his coat and tossed it carelessly aside, thus revealing one of the finest forms ever vouchsafed man. He lacked two inches of being six feet tall, and was not broad-shouldered, but every part of his form was admirably rounded, and his chest was a marvel of development.

Buzzard was at least three inches taller, his breadth of chest and shoulders was remarkable, his arms were long and large, and his hands ponderous enough to wield a sledge-bammer like a toy.

Rube advanced briskly and confronted the giant.

"Choose your mode of fighting," he calmly said. "I am ready for either fist or grapple."

Bill's lips parted in a cruel, hungry smile and he thrust out one ponderous hand to grasp his enemy's throat. Somewhat to his surprise, it was brushed carelessly aside.

"Some other day," said Ralston, coolly.

The words angered Bill afresh, and he sent out his clinched left hand with a blow which would have done demoralizing work had it reached its destination. It did not. It was brushed aside as his other hand had been, and, in the expressive language of the day, Rube never "turned a hair."

"Stop trifling," said the latter calmly, "and come right down to business!"

The giant did not decline the invitation. He sprang at Rube like a tiger and, using first one fist and then the other, sent out blow after blow, rapidly, and with terrific force, driving the smaller man around in a circle.

That was all he did. Not one of his blows reached the keen, calm face before him; Colorado Rube had his hands up in the style of a skillful boxer, and he warded off every blow as systematically as the swing of a pendulum.

His friends in the body of the house, who had expected to see him easily beaten down, were both amazed and delighted. It gradually dawned upon them that their champion had the art of self-defense down to a fine point, and that the victory is not always with the strong. Rube's "science" enabled him to parry Bill's crushing blows with ease.

No one was so much surprised as the giant himself. He had expected to beat down his enemy without trouble and, having no knowledge of the art of self-defense, this impenetrable guard surprised and bewildered him.

The only encouraging thing was that Rube gave ground, and as the desperado saw it was his point to retreat in a circle, and thus keep the platform all at his service, he determined to corner him and end the fight.

Accordingly, he acted on this idea and prevented the circling. Having his man cornered, he rushed in to beat him down. Then occurred another surprise.

Rube passed his brawny fist upward and over his shoulder, shot forward under it, and was behind Bill in a twinkling.

"Here I am, William!" he gently announced.

Bill Buzzard turned about. He had exerted himself a great deal during the first round, and his wind was not so good as before, but that was not all. It was clear to him that he was no match for Ralston at the game they had been playing.

It was a bitter humiliation, but he was not all fool, and he saw that it was so. He paused to get breath and think what he could do next.

"Will you have a drink of water?" politely asked Rube.

"I'll have your blood—that's what I'll have!" growled the giant, pantingly.

"Perhaps you'd like the earth, too?"

"Sneer on; I'll be arter ye in a minute."

"The latch-string is always out, William."

Bill Buzzard drew a deep breath and then rushed forward again. He did not intend to waste any more strength in pounding the air; it was his intention to close with him, to crush him in a grasp no man he had ever met had yet been able to withstand.

Colorado Rube saw his purpose from the first, but he did not seek to avoid him.

Standing firmly braced he met the rush unflinchingly and the two grappled. Rube's friends were now alarmed afresh. True, their champion had secured the advantage of hold, but what would it avail him against Bill's immense strength?

The latter found in his grasp a substance which did not crush easily. Ralston's body was like iron, and when Bill tried to break his hold, to bend the arms which were wound about him, it was all in vain.

The smaller man was as much at home as a wrestler as with his fists.

Back and forth they moved, but Rube was only waiting for an opening. He saw it, caught the giant in a skillful lock and laid him flat on his back.

The three Buzzards beyond the platform looked at each other in amazement. What manner of a man was this who handled their colossal brother so easily?

Bill arose as quickly as possible and dashed forward to another encounter. He was mad with wrath and resolved to turn the tables. In Ralston's eyes, too, there was a gleam not before noticeable.

It would be a decisive round.

They grappled, and a furious struggle began. Back and forth they staggered, their movements shaking the platform and awakening loud echoes through the hall. But it was soon over. Colorado Rube gathered himself for a great effort, raised the giant and threw him from the platform.

There was a tremendous crash and Bill Buzzard and a broken chair went down together.

He arose quickly, almost foaming with rage, but a new idea was in his mind. He had promised to go away from Hotspur City quietly, if he was worsted by Ralston, but, to him, a promise was but idle breath. He had no intention of keeping it; he was resolved to have his enemy's life-blood.

He made a rush for the table where lay the revolvers, caught one up, cocked it and turned about.

Colorado Rube seemed a doomed man, but he stood on the platform, facing the desperado, a quiet smile on his face.

Buzzard pulled the trigger.

The hammer fell, but there was no report.

"Before you try again," said Rube, coolly, "you had better put in a cartridge and arrange your cylinder so it will revolve."

The giant looked at the weapon, uttered a curse, threw it down, picked up another and then burst into a roar.

"Treachery!" he shouted. "Thar has been foul play!"

"You have been outwitted—that's all," Rube evenly replied. "I knew your way, Bill Buzzard, and prepared for this from the first. I knew you would not keep your promise, and the proposal to put all the revolvers on the table was a step to forestall your treachery. I spoke to a friend of mine, and he crawled under the table, before the hall was cleared, and has been there ever since. While you have been watching the stage he has rendered your revolvers useless, at the same time removing those of my friends. You will see they have them now."

"An' hyar I come, like a light from under a bushel, ez Socrates used fer ter remark," said another voice.

And Makepeace Mullin crawled from under the table.

Dead silence reigned for a while in the room. Bill Buzzard was incapable of speech. He saw that he had been outwitted; he saw the revolvers of the three miners bearing upon him and his brothers; and he knew that it would be madness to attempt further hostilities. He was defeated; worse than that, he had been outwitted.

The English language did not contain words enough to express the mad, blind rage which foamed within him like the waters of a whirlpool. Outwitted! Deceived! His broad chest arose and fell as his breath came in great gasps, and he laid one hand on the table as though he was faint and dizzy. *Defeated and outwitted!*

It was the bitterest moment of his life.

Colorado Rube watched him keenly. Long before he had seen that Tom, Jack, and Dave Buzzard were leaving all to their elder brother, and he knew they would do so now. As he decided, so would the matter go.

Bill turned slowly and faced him.

"You've played a cunnin' trick, ain't ye?" he huskily said.

"I took precautions against treachery on your part, and the sequel proves I did wisely. You promised that if I worsted you, you and your brothers would go away and leave Hotspur City in peace. You should have kept that pledge. Now, listen to me, Bill, for I swear I speak the truth. You were not tricked at the time of the election. I was sincerely and honestly for Rousseau, but I was also for peace, and when Mumford was elected, I gave him my hand frankly. He offered me the place of secretary and I accepted. All was above-board, and you have no cause for spite. Major Mumford, have I, or have I not, spoken the truth?"

"Upon my word of honor, you have spoken the truth," the old man replied.

"Hear, and be convinced, Bill. Now, I do not want trouble with you. You have seen something of my physical prowess, to-night, and I tell you frankly I do not fear any man in Colorado, with revolver, rifle or fists, or in a grapple. But I prefer to be at peace with you.

My wife is your sister, and she wishes you well. So do I. Let me call your attention to the fact that I did not once strike you to-night—"

"You've said enough already!" broke in the giant, who was once more calm. "I want ter hear no more. It is my turn now. I hev decided ter leave Hotspur at once. You kin swar in yer mayor, an' kick up yer heels ez high ez ye please, but mark my words: Bill Buzzard never furgits an' he never furgives. You'll hear from him ag'in. Your town shall reap death fur ther sowing o' ter night; I'll make Hotspur a graveyard! That's enough fur me ter say, but don't you never furgit it, Rube Ralston. You stole my sister, you've tricked an' humbled me, an' yer own hand hev signed yer death-warrant. That's enough!"

He thrust his useless revolvers into his belt and turned to his stalwart brothers. They, too, secured their weapons, and each one turned a glance of undying hatred upon Colorado Rube.

He met their glare firmly but silently.

Then, in single file, with Bill at their head, the Buzzards strode down the aisle toward the door.

CHAPTER VII.

MAYOR MUMFORD

SILENCE reigned in the hall until the door closed with a bang behind the giant brothers. It was Makepeace Mullin who spoke first.

"'Thar darkest hour is jest afore dawn,' ez Socrates used fer ter observe."

No one answered, but Colorado Rube went to a window to see what the Buzzards would do when outside. For once Bill kept his word—perhaps because he did not care to engage all Hotspur under such unfavorable circumstances. He had said he and his brothers would go, and they went. Utter silence reigned in the crowd outside, for no one ventured a word. They were glad to see the dark cloud temporarily lifted from their infant city.

Ralston directed Mullin to call the people in, and himself went to Cyrus Mumford.

"There will be no further trouble about your inauguration," he pleasantly said.

"I'm thinking of declining the office," said the elder man abruptly.

"What?"

Mumford repeated his remark.

"What in the world do you mean?"

"There is trouble ahead for Hotspur City," answered Mumford. "The Buzzards have been worsted for once, but they have only received a discomfiture which will add to their wrath; Bill will do his best to keep his threat to make Hotspur a graveyard."

"Of course he will, for he's revengeful enough for anything; but what of it?"

"I do not underrate the brothers," gravely replied the mayor-elect. "They are but four, but they are equal to an army. All Hotspur—except you—fears them. I foresee bloodshed, and as I did not agree to be a military officer, I wish to resign. What is needed is a younger man—a strong arm and an active head—at the front. Let Rousseau have the office."

"Not by any means, my dear sir. You are legally elected, the people are pleased, and you must take the place. I think all Hotspur ought to be able to take care of Bill Buzzard and his brothers. Don't let them see we fear them. As for the strong arm, I'll fill that place and be your fighting man, and I think we can defy all of our city's enemies."

Mumford hesitated. He wanted the office, now he was elected, and his pride rebelled at the thought of showing the white feather; but the threat of Bill Buzzard was ever in his mind.

Colorado Rube renewed his arguments, and by the time the people were fairly in their places again, the victory was his.

"So be it," said Mumford, abruptly, "but you must be even more to me than was intended. I will be mayor, but you must be the Strong Arm of Hotspur City!"

"Agreed," said Ralston, smiling. "I'll back your administration for all I'm worth, but I trust there will not be so much trouble as you anticipate. And now, as the people are ready, let us proceed with the inauguration."

Once more the dignitaries of the place ascended the platform, once more the Reverend Mr. Wolff proceeded to administer the oath of office, and this time there was no interruption. It was taken amid an impressive silence, and, for weal or woe, Cyrus Mumford was Mayor of Hotspur City.

Nevertheless, there was an air about the ceremony which seemed more fitting a funeral than a gala occasion. Those who had not been in the hall had received a brief description of what had occurred, and all knew that though the Buzzard brothers had been worsted, Bill had sworn to make Hotspur City a graveyard.

Mature thought shows that the idea of four men being the terror of a town is not new or strange. Let one desperate criminal be at large in an extent of country, even in the East where the law is supposed to be supreme, and men and women alike will have the possibility of a secret attack always before them. Every large city has its "hard" locality. The thugs

of the section are comparatively few, but the man who wanders through the streets in their haunts by night does so with every sense on the alert.

The Buzzards reigned supreme at Sugar-Loaf. When the first cabin of the infant town was erected, the builders looked up and saw the "Roost" on the top of the peak. And in the days which followed, they had been left alone, hated and feared.

Only one man would have dared lead an attack against them, and though he was the Strong Arm of Hotspur, he had married the Buzzards' sister and would not harm them.

So the young city must go on, fearing them, guarding against them, ever dreading an attack, but afraid to carry the war into the enemy's camp.

But the night's work had made Rube Ralston the idol of Hotspur. That any one man could defy and conquer Bill Buzzard as he had done seemed almost impossible, but five good citizens had seen him do it, and the people knew too few words with which to properly express their admiration.

Mumford's chance expression was heard and taken up, and from that hour Colorado Rube was called the Strong Arm of the city.

When the people separated, it was with a feeling of pride that they lived in a city; but over all hung like a sable robe the threat of Bill Buzzard—he had sworn to make Hotspur City a graveyard!

The following morning Neal Bishop was seated in the saloon connected with the Old Rye Hotel, when Rube Ralston sauntered into the room. He was on his way to the office when he observed Bishop, and wheeling, came to his side and held out his hand.

He had not failed to recognize the man who had interfered in his behalf the previous evening.

"Good-morning," he said, pleasantly. "I trust you are not feeling any ill effects from the events of last night?"

Bishop would greatly have preferred to be left alone; for reasons best known to himself this friendliness from Ralston was unpleasant; but he answered, with the manner of one intended by nature for a gentleman:

"Thank you, sir, I do not. I received a heavy blow, but it alighted somewhere—I never realized where exactly, it came so quick—where it did no harm. I haven't so much as a scratch to show for it."

"That's pleasant, for I should have been sorry if any one had been injured in my service. I want to thank you for your good-will, and as you seem a stranger in the city, I shall be pleased to see you at my house."

Visit Rube Ralston—the man whom his sister was deliberately planning to ruin for some unknown reason!

Neal Bishop would as soon have thought of trying to kill him. Whatever the young man's faults, at which Broderick had hinted, the sense of honor was far from being dead in him, and he could not have broken Ralston's bread and let the iniquitous conspiracy go on.

He felt like hastily arising and leaving the place, but this would hardly do.

"I am very much obliged, sir," he stiffly said, "but I cannot allow my slight service to be so enlarged. At the most, it was only what humanity demanded, and I made a botch of it. As for visiting you, you are very kind, but circumstances compel me to decline—with thanks."

Ralston saw that Bishop meant what he said, and he gracefully retreated from his position.

"Do you intend to settle in our city?" he then added.

"Not if last night's scene was a specimen of life here."

"I assure you it was not. Such a scene was never before known in Hotspur City; it is not a place of roughs and murderers. If I had not been there last night, there would have been no trouble. The hostility of the Buzzards is all directed toward me—or was, primarily—but it really amounts to nothing. I can afford to laugh at the fellows, for otherwise my life is a very happy one. I've a fair share of worldly goods, and the happiest home in Colorado."

Neal Bishop clinched his hand tightly. Why did this man sit there and talk to him about his happy home?—to him who knew that a storm was gathering which might blast that home forever, and, knowing, dared not give so much as a hint.

"I leave the city at once," he curtly said.

"In that case, there is no more to be said. Well, I wish you good luck, and if you ever come to Hotspur again, and want a friend, remember me."

Ralston arose, extended his hand, which Neal took with reluctance, and resumed his way to the clerk's office.

"An odd genius, that. If he was not born eccentric, I'm afraid Bill's blow has upset his mental equilibrium somewhat. Now for the other business."

He accosted the clerk genially, and when a few words had been said about the weather, and the inauguration, added:

"You have a young lady stopping here whose name is Miss Fenton, I believe."

"Yes. She came yesterday."

"Exactly. Well, will you send word to her that I am here?"

The clerk called a Chinaman, who went on the errand, and who soon returned with the information that Miss Fenton would see Mr. Ralston in the parlor at once.

Toward that point he went, and he had barely taken his seat when the lady also entered. Colorado Rube was neither old nor blind, and he saw at once she was attractive of face and form, and he would have been less than a man if these facts had made no impression.

As he arose she came forward with extended hand, a smile on her handsome face.

"This is Mr. Ralston, I suppose."

"Such is my name. I received your note, an hour ago, and have answered it so soon as possible."

"I think I should have known you anywhere, after the account of your battle last night."

"Indeed! Do I look like a pugilist?"

"Nonsense, Mr. Ralston. You ought to know that if I meant that I should not have mentioned it. But what I do mean, is that you look capable of subduing giants. However, we won't speak of that now."

"No. Let us rather return to business. When did you see Colonel Nelson last?"

"A month ago, at Lincoln. It was when he gave me the letter to you."

"What did the colonel say about me?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PLOT BEGINS TO WORK.

THERE was a trifle of anxiety in Ralston's voice, which a careless exterior could not hide, as though the opinion of Colonel Nelson was something of great importance to him, but Mildred Fenton knew better than he suspected why he asked the question.

The first drama in Colorado Rube's life did not date from the time when he met the fair schemer in the hotel parlor; there was a wild, strange past which he had left so far as he was able when he came to Hotspur City; one which he would rather be a beggar than have known; and he was ever afraid it would appear like Banquo's ghost when least wanted.

All this Miss Fenton knew, for it had brought her to Hotspur City, but she veiled her secret amusement under a smile.

"The whole story may be briefly told, Mr. Ralston. The colonel was an old friend of father's, and I was his favorite when I was a child, but, in after years, we lost all trace of the wandering colonel. It was by mere chance we met in Lincoln. I had just passed through a series of afflictions and misfortunes. The first was the death of my father; the last, the loss of the property he left me. This story I will tell you in detail when I have more time."

Miss Fenton looked very sad, and she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, ostensibly to absorb the tears she could not hide. Really, it was partly for effect, partly to hide the fact that there were no tears.

"You were unfortunate," said Ralston, sympathetically.

"I was alone in the world, friendless and penniless," said she, her voice trembling. "What to do I did not at first know, but I thought I had got to earn my own living and rose to the demands of the occasion. I resolved to go among the Mormons as a teacher. You know of the attempt which is being made to convert them by these means?"

"Yes."

"I was on the point of going when Colonel Nelson appeared. You cannot imagine what a change that made in my life. At one bound I arose from misery to new life. He had not forgotten his old favorite, he was as kind and good as ever, and he peremptorily forbade my going to Utah. He declared that he had sufficient money for us both, and that while he lived the daughter of his old friend should not suffer."

"That was like the colonel," Rube observed quickly.

"It was, indeed. Well, when he had gone thus far, he was at a loss what to do next. He wanted to provide for me, but did not want to leave me alone with strangers. Neither was he willing to abandon his roving life for nearly a year, as his plans for his scientific work were not fully completed. Then it was that he thought of you, and he made a proposal which I have thus far followed, though with some hesitation."

"In plain words, he thought I could help him to carry out his plans. Well, he was right. The colonel has done me a favor, too, and I am ready to do anything possible to please him."

"Do not speak so positively, Mr. Ralston," said the lady, with a light laugh. "Hear his scheme. For six months, at least, as I said before, he will not be ready to settle down. His proposal was that I inflict my presence upon you until that time. In plain words, if you would give me a home, he would pay all expenses."

Colorado Rube was not pleased. Miss Fenton had the appearance and manner of a lady—though his discerning eyes did not fail to per-

ceive that she was no amateur in life's real battle—but if she had been a princess, he would have felt sorry to see her enter his house.

When he married, after ten years of wild adventure, he entered upon a period of calm happiness of which he had before had no knowledge. Mona possessed few of the traits of her lawless brothers, and as the mistress of a home she seemed to Rube to be unrivaled.

The presence of a stranger would interfere with their quiet contentment, however pleasant the new-comer might prove as a companion.

At the same time, Rube owed a debt of deep gratitude to Colonel Nelson—of which, more anon—and he did not think of refusing so comparatively simple a request.

"I am very glad the colonel mentioned the money part," he said, laughing. "Such a monstrous expense might break me. Jestings aside, Miss Fenton, I shall be pleased to oblige both him and yourself, and the doors of my house fly open at the magic word."

"I have papers here which he sent to you."

The lady then presented a letter and some other documents which Ralston glanced over. They merely explained what she had already stated, and need not be recorded here.

"Well," said Rube, as he finished, "I presume you are not exactly partial to hotel life, and if you will get ready we will at once go to my house."

The plotting woman concealed her satisfaction under a becoming mask, and left him to don her outer garments and exult over her easy victory.

For weal or woe it was settled, but he little knew what a serpent he was taking into his house. He did not suspect that the papers were all forgeries, or that a plot was begun which was intended to ruin that home and his future life.

The two left the hotel twenty minutes later.

Among those who saw them go was Neal Bishop, and a look of mingled anger and deep regret rested on his face, but it vanished as a hand fell heavily on his shoulder. He wheeled and stood facing John Broderick.

"How now, man?" the latter cried. "You look as glum as though the end of the world was coming."

"I perceive your plot is working well," said Bishop, bitterly.

"A peculiarity of my plots; but what have you seen that is new?"

"Look yonder!"

"At what?"

"At Mildred and Ralston."

"Yes. A fine-looking couple."

"John Broderick, you are a fiend!"

"Thank you. Is that all?"

"What is your scheme against that unsuspecting man?"

"Ralston? Well, my scheme is to bring him to his knees. I hate him, and when I hate I punish. Bah! it would be a poor revenge to shoot him, but, by introducing Mildred, I will stab him to the heart. Look out for domestic jars. Your fair sister will win Ralston's love, and, between us, we will make him believe his wife's affections have left their legitimate place."

"You are bold to tell this," sullenly observed Bishop.

"I tell it so that you may not be in doubt as to the game we are playing; otherwise, you might by some accident do that which would foil us."

"What is to hinder me from telling Ralston all?"

"Your safety. Go slow, my dear sir, and beware of my talons. I am no chicken when aroused. This game is going on, and it's death to you to interfere. Remember Red River Run."

Bishop was pale and his voice was husky, but he looked at his companion defiantly.

"Suppose I am willing to ruin myself to save this man? What is to hinder me from telling all and defying what you may say? I am not sure but I am willing to have the Red River affair made public. My existence is a nightmare, anyway, and it will never be any worse."

"You have said just what I wanted you to say. You threaten to defy me and take the consequences. Now, look here; I am not a man to be trifled with. If I suspect you are playing me false, I won't wait to tell people about Red River. I have a strong hand and a sure revolver. Defy me, and you shall feel both. As sure as I live, I'll kill you as I would a mad-dog if you try to betray me!"

Broderick towered to his full height, his voice as penetrative as steel, and his black mustache was raised until one could see his teeth gleaming wolfishly behind it. No one, seeing him then, could doubt but he was capable of the darkest deed known to man.

Bishop, however, laughed recklessly, shortly and unmusically.

"Begin now, if you wish," he said.

"I am in no hurry. You are Mildred's brother, and for the sake of so sensible a woman I want to give you a chance. But don't use it to our injury. I am a devil when aroused—I confess it freely—and it means death if you betray us. Be warned in time and be wise."

"Perhaps you would not find me so easy to kill. The shoe might get onto the other foot."

"And you kill me? Ha! ha! that is a rich joke. Why, you are a boy compared with me. I laugh at you!"

"Again, you may feel the weight of Ralston's heavy hand. He is no child."

"He knocked Bill Buzzard out from under his hat handsomely. I acknowledge that. But I should not tackle him at close quarters. When I hit it is with the odds in my favor. I rely on a knife-thrust between the shoulders, or a revolver-shot when my man is off his guard, or a little poison in his coffee."

"I might know you would strike like a coward," said Bishop, bitterly.

"You'll find out all about my way one of these days," coolly replied Broderick. "I am at Hotspur City to win, and win I will, despite a hundred piling fools like you. Take care you don't get into my path."

"What is the mysterious grudge you have against Ralston?"

"That's my business, not yours. Don't try to know too much about it, for it's not safe."

"Perhaps you think I am to be kicked around as you see fit," said Bishop, sullenly, "but you may change your mind anon."

Broderick clasped his arm. The sneering smile was still on his face, but the grasp of his strong hand seemed almost likely to make the fingers meet in Neal's arm. The latter tried to shake off his hold, but the elder man was his physical master, and he proved it then.

"Don't struggle!" said Broderick, mockingly. "You are like a bird that vainly beats against the bars of its cage. I am your master. Let this little incident teach you that I am not to be bent or broken. When I start out to do a thing I do it, and woe to the man who stands in my path. It means death for you to interfere!"

Broderick dropped his companion's arm, turned away and walked from the room without another word.

Neal looked after him with an expression of the deepest hatred, but all was expressed by the brief sentence with which he met a momentary thought of rebellion:

"I am a helpless coward!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE GATHERING STORM.

MILDRED FENTON was fairly installed at Ralston's house. The conquest had been an easy one; far easier than she had anticipated. Colorado Rube deemed it his duty to comply with any request made by his old friend, Colonel Nelson, and Mrs. Ralston cheerfully agreed to whatever her husband thought best.

On the whole, Mildred made a good impression. Without trying to assume an air of ignorance, she hid her knowledge of the world somewhat, and her frank, pleasant ways seemed those of her heart and were accepted as a criterion.

Both Rube and his wife were sorry to have a stranger in the house, but Miss Fenton did not seem like one who would be an unpleasant feature.

During the afternoon Rube was with Mayor Mumford the greater part of the time. There was no little work to do to bring Hotspur City from her embryotic stage to the full glory of her new standing, and the new official soon saw that he would have to depend a good deal on his clerk in order to make affairs run smoothly.

Rube settled down to the work like a veteran. If he was not experienced, it was in his favor that no one would expect their border city to be conducted like an Eastern metropolis, and he had no difficulty in bringing order out of chaos. That he was to be the "Strong Arm" of the place was more than ever clear. Mumford was giving him full sway in the department of justice, and he frankly stated that he looked to his clerk to foil a second attack by the Buzzards.

Colorado Rube laughed at the mention of the giant brothers' name, but the mayor would never cease to fear them while they and he lived.

Miss Fenton retired that night to her room in triumph, and, when alone, at once sat down and dashed off a few lines to Broderick. This is what she wrote:

"Victory is ours! I am safely established in the castle of the enemy, and one regiment of soldiers there is better than ten outside. Nothing could have worked better. Wise as this Rube Ralston is reputed to be, he walked into the trap like a lamb. He was very glad to oblige his old friend and—he took me in. Bravo, my fellow conspirator, all goes well, and we will bring ruin and desolation to this fool's paradise. Do not be reckless, but see me when you can."

She did not sign her name but, going to the window, raised the lower half and looked out. A man almost immediately started from the shadow of a tree and she recognized Broderick. He did not speak, but the wave of his hand was the pre-arranged signal, and the paper fluttered to the ground. He picked it up, waved his hand again and hastened away.

The following day when the stage brought the mail, one letter came which was addressed

to "Cyrus Mumford, *Private*," and this letter was brought to him at his house after he had finished office work.

The mayor had a pleasant home, over which Zetta Willis presided with rare judgment for one of her years, and it was the most notable residence, all things considered, of which Hotspur City could boast. Mumford was the rich man of the young city, and though he had no desire to dazzle his neighbors, he did have a desire to be surrounded with a considerable degree of comfort.

Still, he was accustomed to assert that the only luxury he allowed himself was his deceased sister's daughter—Zetta.

She was sitting opposite to him when he carelessly picked up the letter and read it, but she was busy over her work and did not notice the varying shades of emotion with which he read.

Written in a bold, masculine hand, the letter was as follows:

"CYRUS MUMFORD, Esq., Mayor of Hotspur City:—
"DEAR SIR:—Information having reached me of the events attending your inauguration as chief executive officer, the mention of another name recalls to my recollection circumstances far from being to the credit of your chief clerk, Reuben Ralston. What do you know of the man? Nothing, I conclude, except that he came to Hotspur a year or so ago, and that by his smooth way of speaking, insidious arts and personal prowess he has made you and your friends think well of him. The personal prowess, I admit; like many other Western desperadoes, he possesses a skill for fighting, and a courage which nothing can surpass or subdue.

"But, in his fight with the man named Buzzard, I must insist that the greater ruffian won. Who is this so-called 'Colorado Rube'? A man known in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona as a gambler, swindler and cut-throat, outlawed repeatedly for the first-named predilection, hunted as a road-agent, and despised of honest men, he has seen fit to go to Colorado, where he is unknown, and, under a false name, to 'lay low' for awhile. What is now his game? Has he reformed? Rubbish! the leopard does not change his spots. No; he has some deep game which will result to his own gain and to Hotspur's sorrow.

"I feel it my duty to notify you just what this man is. In one sense of the word, I have no interest in the matter, for Hotspur City is its own master; but it seems a pity that the gambler and road-agent of the southern trail should impose on honest men. Hence, this warning.

"I remain, Mayor Mumford, yours very truly,
"WARREN E. BLAISDELL."

Just as the mayor finished reading Zetta chanced to look up, and the amazed and disgusted expression on his face at once arrested her attention.

"Are the perplexities of office beginning so soon?" she asked, smiling.

"Read that!" answered Mumford, throwing the letter to his niece.

He had obeyed an impulse in so doing, and as is usually the case, regretted it soon after. But, as Zetta had begun, he let her finish, and then, as she looked up with an expression of indignation, grimly asked:

"What do you think of it?"

"Think! I don't believe a word of it," the girl quickly said.

"The charge is explicit enough."

"And false enough, too, I know. Who is Warren E. Blaisdell, and why didn't he come here to make his charge, if he really knew aught not to Mr. Ralston's credit?"

"My dear, you should have been a lawyer; your mind has grasped the main points of the case at one bound. This letter is equivalent to an anonymous letter—the weapon of the coward and rascal. It does not tell where Blaisdell is to be found, nor does it say he will appear to prove what he asserts. It is the work of some personal enemy of my worthy secretary—possibly it emanated from the Buzzard brothers, possibly from a member of the defeated party of the late election, who is not satisfied with the compromise. You may burn it, Zetta."

"Shall you mention it to Mr. Ralston?"

"Certainly not."

"Let me preserve it. I will see that it does not fall into hands hostile to Mr. Ralston, and if the writer should continue his work, it may be of use."

Mr. Mumford agreed to this plan, and endeavored to forget the matter, but it hovered pertinaciously in his mind. He had a good deal of confidence in Ralston, but when he had meditated more carefully, he found himself asking several practical questions.

What did he really know about his secretary? Very little. Something like a year before, the young man had come to Hotspur; since he had been there he had conducted himself like an honest man and made many friends. People had always thought well of him—since he had worsted Bill Buzzard he had been the idol of the city—and no one had questioned him concerning his past.

Colorado Rube had alluded to it in a casual way, and Mumford now remembered that he had acknowledged familiarity with the very locality where the unknown writer asserted he had figured as a road-agent and gambler. This, however, proved nothing against him; Mumford was generous enough to believe just the reverse; but, like all accusations stealthily planted, it hovered in his mind whether he would forget it or not.

At the same time he was troubling himself thus, a man was hovering around Colorado Rube's house, now hiding in the shadow of a tree, anon walking near the building, but seeming to take great care that he was not observed by any of the inmates.

The prowler was Neal Bishop.

Several times he had tried to gain a view of the room where a light told him the family was assembled, but a curtain prevented him from doing so, and he moved about like a small vessel watching for a chance to close with a larger one.

For perhaps the tenth time he had thrust his face near to the window, to try the old attempt over again, when the curtain was brushed aside and he stood face to face with his sister.

For a moment neither stirred. The gay smile faded from Miss Fenton's face, giving place to a look of anger and alarm, and she stared at Neal as though he was a phantom. His folly and bravado in thus hovering around her were almost beyond belief.

Recovering herself, she made an imperious gesture for him to go away, but a dogged expression came to his face and he answered with a motion bidding her to join him outside. For an instant she was at a loss; she had always been the stronger-minded and more resolute of the two, but she thought he was just in the mood to invade the house and demand to see her, if nothing more, and that would be a misfortune not easily explained away.

So she nodded in reply to his motion and dropped the curtain.

He went a little back to the shadow of a tree and stood looking gloomily at the house.

"She has found fine quarters. Well, it's the way of the world. She, who is unscrupulous and plotting, is the favorite of fortune, while I, who would gladly be an honest man, am like a foot-ball. That's the justice of the world!"

He ground his heel discontentedly into the ground, though he was really conscious that he had only to desert the fortunes of his unscrupulous sister, and go where he was unknown, to begin life anew without the incubus of the past about his neck.

His desire to reform her might prove his ruin yet.

Not much time was given him to think of it then, for the door opened, and Mildred, wrapped in a dark shawl, came swiftly toward him.

CHAPTER X.

JOHN BRODERICK'S EVENTFUL ENCOUNTER.

It would be time lost to try to analyze Neal Bishop's nature and course. Some people would say he was a fool to continue faithful to a woman so low in the scale of honor as Mildred; others would admire him for his true, though misplaced, devotion; but, in any case, he could not forget that she was the sister with whom he had played in his childhood, and he would not leave her while a hope remained.

She came rapidly toward the tree, and then, seeing him, made an angry gesture.

"In Heaven's name, what are you doing here? Can't I enjoy a quiet evening without your coming and skulking around the house like a tramp?"

Whatever her brother's failings, Miss Fenton was plainly practical enough.

"That's it!" he retorted, bitterly. "You call me by a good name. I have sunk to the level of a tramp—"

"Did you come here to tell such stale news?"

"No. I came to speak to you about yourself."

"Do you see that light yonder?"

"Yes."

"It is that of the Old Rye Hotel. I advise you to turn your face toward it and follow your nose for about five minutes."

"Be careful, Mildred," he said, hoarsely. "Your bitterness may cause the worm to turn, at last, and when you want a friend you may wish for one in vain."

"Heaven forbid that I should seek such a one as you."

"I know your scorn and contempt, but I am not so easily turned from my purpose. I am resolved to save you from John Broderick, if such a thing is possible. Listen to me, Mildred, before it is too late. Why will you follow the fortunes of a man whose every hour is devoted to evil scheming? Leave him and—"

"Leave him for you? Never! I am heartily tired of your sentimental whining. Will you never stop it! Let us understand each other tonight. Our paths lie in different directions. I want no more to do with you, for we are not of natures that assimilate. Go your way and I will go mine."

"Mildred—"

"I tell you I will not listen to your preaching!" cried the girl, stamping her foot. "You are no brother of mine. I despise you, and I cast you off. Is that plain enough? Now, leave me and never return!"

Bishop was silent for a moment, but, though he felt that argument was useless, he soon renewed his efforts and made an earnest appeal. It was in vain; she was as fixed in her purpose

as the peaks of the Rocky Mountains in their places.

She was becoming nervous at the delay, too, for she had ostensibly gone to her room and Rube or his wife might discover her where she was, and she proceeded to bring the interview to an unceremonious end. For once, Neal responded in a way which pleased her. He despaired of accomplishing his object, and he said as much, adding that he would leave Hotspur City and never trouble her again.

Nothing he could have said would have pleased her more, and they separated in an extremely practical way. Bishop was sufficiently angry to waste no fine words, but he gave her his hand and turned away.

When he had gone a few yards he turned and looked back, but she was already entering the house and what he had to say remained unspoken.

As he strode down the street he did not notice a man who was looking sharply out from the cover of a tree, but he was seen and promptly followed.

"Thar's them ez wouldn't have s'posed Rube's gal pard would git a lover so quick," muttered the pursuer, "but beauty will tell. 'Youth's bright lexicon knows no sech word ez fail,' ez Socrates used fer ter observe."

The speaker was Makepeace Mullin, and he followed Bishop to the saloon of the Old Rye and there, by the light of the place, succeeded in recognizing him.

Unsuspecting that he had been followed, Neal went to the bar, called for a glass of whisky and swallowed it with a reckless air. He was not even a moderate drinker, but on this night he felt as though it mattered very little what he did, or even whether he lived.

"Reckon he got ther mitten," thought Makepeace, reading him well. "Ez Socrates used fer ter observe, 'Ther course o' true love always runs tempestuous.' Wal, I'm sorry fur him, but I can't help in ther game, so I reckon I'll keep out on't."

Broderick was playing a careful waiting game. He showed no interest in Colorado Rube, and, thus far, no one had suspected that he so much as knew Mildred Fenton. There was really no risk in his being on the scene of action, unless Neal Bishop betrayed him, for men came and went at the border city and no one thought of suspecting a crooked purpose if they mentioned no fair one.

Greatly to the plotter's relief he saw Bishop take the stage away from Hotspur the following morning, and, though he did not venture to question him, he hoped he would not reappear. If he did, and became dangerous, Broderick was resolved to silence him once and forever.

Shortly after the stage departed, Broderick wandered outside the village for a ramble. Hotspur was rich in mountain scenery. At the east the tall, frowning mountains presented a barrier which no man's gaze could pierce, while the lessening line of the foothills was wild and attractive. Sugar-Loaf was the most notable feature of the immediate vicinity, but, to the east of it, the smaller elevation of Bull's Head furnished the wildest, most intricate specimen of Nature's grim facetiousness; it was literally rock piled upon rock, without form or order.

Broderick had no desire to explore either of these places, but finding a suitable place he finally sat down and found his gaze fixed on Buzzard's Roost.

The little house on Sugar-Loaf's top was a mystery to Hotspur City. Only Mumford, Ralston and his wife had ever been there. The remainder of the citizens looked upon it much as the good people of fairy tales were said to regard the castles in which dwelt evil and mysterious giants. The Buzzards were both figuratively and literally the giants of Hotspur City.

"Desperate fellows," thought Broderick, "but the time may come when I shall join hands with them. I take it they are men of small mental ability, and their vendetta against Ralston may not go on to their gain. What they need is a shrewd head like mine to direct them. If I fail in other ways, I may yet ally myself with the Buzzards, and get their aid to wipe Colorado Rube out of existence."

His meditations were interrupted as the sound of a horse's hoofs reached his ears. Just beyond him was the stage-road, and he comprehended that some one was taking a gallop along the trail, but why he moved along so that he could see the rider he hardly knew.

Standing on the low ridge which bordered the trail, he looked down and saw the horse and rider. His interest was at once aroused. The rider was a lady, and under his cold, skeptical exterior he had a fancy for the sex.

If he had been interested at first, he was doubly so when the equestrienne came nearer. He saw a girl of a degree of loveliness he had not believed Hotspur City capable of producing, and his gaze became riveted on her face with deep admiration.

The rider was Zetta Willis, who had a strong fancy for such amusement and was often seen in the saddle; but, unconscious of the watcher, she galloped past without turning her head.

"By my life!" muttered Broderick, "what sort of a creature is this? Does this wild country produce nymphs and fairies? A prettier girl I never saw. Who is she? A resident of Hotspur, of course, and I'm a liar if I don't know her inside of forty-eight hours! Such a rose must not blush unseen, or whatever the old poet said. I'll see, I'll conquer—*veni, vidi, vici!* Ha! John Broderick, my boy, life is not all a barren waste. While Mildred is sowing the seeds of discord in Colorado Rube's home, you can be amusing yourself by a flirtation with Hebe, Diana—which of those old dames was the most beautiful? I hardly know, for I'm not up' in history. But this mountain beauty beats them all—and she's yours, John Broderick!"

He gave his long, drooping mustache a caress, and straightened his cravat as though about to enter Beauty's parlor, but it was as much a surprise to him as to Zetta when a small animal darted across the trail just in front of the galloping horse and caused a sudden change in the scene.

The high-spirited animal took fright at once, and wheeled so suddenly that his mistress barely kept her seat and had no chance to use the rein, and then came bounding along the back-trail.

Zetta showed no signs of alarm and began to try and check him with all the skill of a practiced rider, but it was a chance Broderick did not fail to improve. He saw that he could stop the horse without risk to his precious person, and he resolved to do it.

It was but a step to the trail, and as the horse, which was fast losing his alarm, dashed to the spot, the man stepped out and grasped the rein.

There was a brief struggle, and then Hero yielded and stood as quietly as though he had never been guilty of insubordination.

Broderick lifted his hat gracefully. "Pardon me for interfering, miss," he said, "but I saw that the animal was taking you the wrong way."

Young ladies admire gallant deeds done in their own behalf, and such things usually invest themselves with an air of romance pleasing to a youthful mind, but Zetta never allowed romance to stand in the way of practical facts, and she was not at all pleased with the dark face which smiled up into her own.

"I am very much obliged for your kindness," she answered, feeling somewhat guilty at having spoken so coldly, but unable to speak otherwise.

"I think you will have no further trouble," he added.

"Oh! Hero is all right now. He never allowed himself to act so before, and I don't think he will again. He tries to appear innocent, but I verily believe he is ashamed of himself."

"Very likely, and he ought to be. You showed great skill in being able to retain your seat."

"I am not new to the saddle."

Zetta gathered up her rein. She felt an impulse to give Hero the word and dash unceremoniously away from the piratical-looking individual before her, but she was good enough to regard his service as disinterestedly given, and she decided not to do anything rude.

He made a complimentary speech after her last remark, and then she once more thanked him and rode on.

"A queen among women, upon my word!" he muttered, looking after her with a dark smile; "I know of no prettier one. She did not enthrall to any great degree, and she would have thanked me more warmly for saving a pet dog, but it may be backwoods modesty. I'll know, at any rate, for I'm not going to let this acquaintance drop here. I'll learn who she is, and then— Well, we'll see if my days of fascination are over."

He stroked his mustache complacently, and then, as he could not hope to again appear as a gallant rescuer, sauntered back to the village.

Before noon he had learned the identity of the fair rider.

"Mayor Mumford's niece!" he muttered. "Now, then, the game assumes new proportions. She's a prize well worth winning, and win her I will. But how? Ha! I have it. I will no longer remain a cipher in Hotspur City; I'll forge a few more papers, and blossom out as a great man, with my credentials in my pocket. First, I'll fascinate old Mumford; next, hurrah for the conquest of fair Zetta's heart!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE BUZZARD BROTHERS' PROCLAMATION.

LIKE the lull after the battle, there was for awhile no further sign from the residents of Buzzard's Roost. Smoke could be seen lazily ascending from the house on the top of Sugar-Loaf, but no one saw anything of the giant brothers.

No one desired to. They had seen quite enough the night of the inauguration, and if the Buzzards would keep away, the young city asked no more.

If they would keep away! This was just what the citizens were afraid they would not do. Bill Buzzard had sworn to make Hotspur

a graveyard, and he certainly had the will to keep his oath.

As to his power, there was a difference of opinion. There were those who laughed at the idea of four men terrorizing a city, but it was noticed that none of those who laughed showed an ambition to march against the quartette; and a great many of the people lived in constant fear.

Mayor Mumford was among the latter class. Fifty years of his life had been spent among peaceful scenes at the West, and he certainly was not the man to lead a city in a warfare, when his hair and beard were white with additional years.

Colorado Rube was the only really cool man in the town. He expected trouble from the Buzzards, but he intended to meet it as he had met their first raid—with a bold front. Had he not been the husband of Mona, he would not have remained idle and let the Buzzards gather strength for a second attack. He wondered that the people did not march against and drive them from their lair, but they contented themselves with remaining in idleness and, with dismal forebodings, watching the smoke which daily told that there was life at Buzzard's Roost.

The day following the events last recorded, Mayor Mumford and his secretary walked arm in arm toward Independence Hall. They were together a good deal of the time since the city's existence began, and it was generally understood that Rube Ralston was the real power of the town.

This pleased the people. Mumford's "high-toned" appearance gave character to the office, and the active mind of the "Strong Arm" of the place would surely direct matters aright.

On the present occasion they observed a crowd of men collected around the door of Independence Hall, all of whom seemed to be earnestly discussing something.

"Business is waiting for us," said the mayor. "What is it now? A case of assault and battery, or a suit for trespass?"

Ralston did not answer at once, but his eyes were busy and he finally replied:

"They seem to be looking at something on the door. Possibly some one has put up a placard there."

"We can't allow that. The boys will have their joke, and in a certain way it is all right, but the decorum of our place of justice must be preserved."

"Perhaps it don't mean anything in particular."

They had advanced near the door, and as the miners saw them they fell back a little and ceased talking.

Rube's suspicion had been well-founded, for there was a placard on the door, and though it was written in an irregular hand and badly spelled, they had no great difficulty in reading it:

"OFFICIAL NOTICE!"

"To the men o' Hotspur City:—

"Ther undersigned give notice that this city will be allowed jest three dais o' grace, at ther expire Ation o' which we will carry out Bill Buzzard's threat ter make Hotspur a Graveyard. It is war ter ther knife after this, an' we will spare neither Man, Woman nor Child. Take notice an' beware o' ther Heavy Hand!"

"THE BUZZARD BROTHERS."

Mayor Mumford's florid face changed color. He had been expecting some sign from the giants of Sugar-Loaf, and it had come at last. It was only to be wondered at that they had not made their announcement by means of knife and revolver, but the fact remained that they intended to resort to their favorite method.

In strong contrast to his troubled expression was Colorado Rube's calm smile.

"That's an interesting bit of literature, Mayor Mumford," he composedly observed.

"Interesting! Good Heavens! it is the same as a death-notice in a paper."

"Then you intend to move against them?"

"How?"

"Didn't you say it was the notice of their death?"

"No; I only wish it was. It is the notice of our death."

"Leave me out; I don't claim any share in it. I don't intend to be carved up to satisfy the gory impulses of the men of Buzzard's Roost. Really, though, I think something ought to be done. Are they to defy and insult our city like that?"

"How can we help it?"

"They are four, all told; we have over a hundred able-bodied men."

"By which I suppose you mean we ought to march against them," said Mumford, gloomily; "but it can't be done. Not five men in Hotspur would invade Buzzard's Roost. The greater part of our people even think Sugar-Loaf is a sort of place accursed."

"That's all nonsense," was Rube's practical reply. "I have no horror of it. I went there and won a wife, and if you don't pick up the glove thus thrown in your face, I'm going there again—alone!"

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"To return this placard. I want to tell the Buzzards that we disapprove of it. I shall walk in on them and say: 'Your contribution to the literature of Hotspur City has been received, read, and respectfully declined.'"

"Good Heavens! would you do that?" cried Mumford.

"Certainly."

"They will kill you."

"Not if I can help it."

"But reflect: it is sheer madness. You would be perfectly helpless among those four giant desperadoes—"

"There's a difference of opinion about that, but we will let the subject drop for now. When the board of aldermen convene, we will discuss measures of protection."

Rube carefully removed the placard, and when the aldermen—there were three, all told—arrived, the placard and the case were laid before them. As Rube was not a city father, but merely a clerk, he took no part in the discussion which followed.

It occupied the entire session, but in Ralston's opinion they did not once get down to solid business. Nothing was said about bearding the Buzzards in their den, which was the only way to manage the difficulty, but it was agreed to keep four guards on duty all night, that the enemy might not attack unseen.

Practical, cool headed Rube was disgusted at the way they met—or, rather, failed to meet—the emergency. Had not the men of Buzzard's Roost been his wife's brothers, he would have insisted that all Hotspur City turn out and rid the region of its pests.

He was not the man to let any one terrorize him.

On the contrary, the remainder of the citizens seemed to be just that kind of men, and they dealt with the desperadoes as though the odds of numbers were against, instead of in their favor.

"It's going to be hot work, Ralston," said the mayor, as they walked homeward together.

"I reckon it will, the way you are running the machine," sarcastically answered Rube.

"What can we do?"

"Do? Well, there's a proverb which says if your eye offends you, you are to pluck it out. The best thing you can do is to pluck the Buzzards before they open hostilities."

"Four men can hold Sugar-Loaf against a hundred."

"Pardon me, mayor, but that's nonsense. I'll agree to take five, if they are men of 'sand,' and clear Sugar-Loaf of any four that ever handled knife and revolver."

"Ah! but the people won't follow you."

"I didn't say I'd lead against the Buzzards. They are my wife's brothers, you know. Still, they're going to make matters hot for you if you let them have their own way. You've let them see you—the people, I mean—are afraid of them, and now they think the earth is theirs."

Mumford did not answer, but he began to consider the advisability of calling for volunteers to march against the Roost. When, however, we say he did it to convince himself he was not afraid, rather than in real resolution, the reader will perceive that the fluctuations of his mind need not be followed.

As they neared Mumford's house, they had a glimpse of a man who was just entering.

"Who was that?" the mayor asked.

"A stranger to me," Rube replied.

"He was well-dressed; possibly we are about to gain another solid citizen."

"He looks more to me like a gambler or blackleg of some sort. However, here we are; if you want me again to-day, send for me."

They separated in the kindly fashion which had marked their whole official and private intercourse, and Mumford entered the house. A Chinese servant announced that a visitor wished to see him, and the mayor went at once to the parlor.

The visitor was John Broderick. He had come at such an hour that he thought the mayor would be busy at Independence Hall, and thereby give him a chance to be entertained by Zetta; but luck was against him and Mumford returned so early that his scheme was frustrated.

"Good-morning, sir," said the mayor, politely. "I am Cyrus Mumford, and my Chinaman tells me you wish to see me."

"Such is the fact, Mr. Mayor," said the plotter, with his most imposing manner, "and when I say I seldom call on any one except on business, you will see I am no idle caller here. I am, sir, an agent of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad Company, and I am in your city to decide on the advisability of extending a branch of our road to Hotspur City!"

CHAPTER XII.

COLORADO RUBE VISITS BUZZARD'S ROOST.

BRODERICK sprung this announcement upon his hearer with the solemnity of a judge delivering a charge to a jury, and at the same time with an air calculated to impress Mumford with the idea that, though Mr. Broderick's name might not appear as president of the Denver &

Rio Grande, he practically carried the road in his vest-pocket.

As he spoke he handed his card to the mayor, but the latter was too deeply affected to read it at once. From its infancy Hotspur had had three great ambitions. First, to become a full-grown city; secondly, to hear the whistle of a railroad engine daily in their town; thirdly, to be quoted as the rival of Leadville.

The first ambition had been gratified, as we have seen, and now the second seemed knocking at their doors.

No wonder the mayor was surprised and pleased.

"Indeed, sir!" he said, with a beaming smile, "I did not suspect the Denver & Rio Grande intended anything of the kind."

"Very possible; for we did not wish to be asked to do that which would be a pecuniary loss, and we would not speak of our project until we had looked the ground over. It was for that purpose, sir, that I came here, and since my arrival I have simply looked about and said nothing to betray my business here. I am, however, convinced that the plan is feasible; that Hotspur is destined to become a place of importance; and the Denver and Rio Grande mean to put the road through if Hotspur gives proper encouragement."

Mumford was eagerly waiting for his chance. "I assure you, sir, you won't find our city backward. Our growing importance"—he improved the chance to use a little diplomacy, himself—"will soon make our present accommodations inadequate, and the railroad is mentioned just in time. We realize it, and we stand ready to back it, sir."

"We thought we had not misjudged Hotspur's public spirit," said Broderick, who, having carefully planned his way of reaching the mayor's heart, was delighted to find his fiction had fallen on fruitful soil.

"You certainly have not. When will work be begun?"

"Immediately after a decision is reached, but the board of directors are so busy that they cannot get this way for a month yet. We expect the road to be in working order before snow flies, however."

"That's good news."

"I am directed to say to you, however, that it is best to keep the matter secret until the visit of the directors. Spur City has petitioned the Denver and Rio Grande to run a branch to their village, and as we can't accommodate both places, it will be just as well to keep the news from them—and it will surely spread if you publicly announce that I have decided in favor of Hotspur."

Again Broderick scored a hit. There was jealousy between the two points he had mentioned, and he had taken the surest way to seal Mumford's mouth; and seal it he knew he must, for if it became generally told that the Denver and Rio Grande had an agent in Hotspur, the road would not be backward about announcing that John Broderick was a swindler.

He manipulated the mayor as he saw fit; so much so that Mumford invited him to make his house his home during the month which would intervene before the visit of the directors.

It was a tempting offer, for the schemer would thus meet Zetta several times a day, but he knew he would thus acquire a prominence he had no wish to encounter; so he explained that it was best that he should keep somewhat in the background, and that he would continue to reside at the Old Rye Hotel.

He would, however, he pleased to visit Mr. Mumford often, he added, and the two drank to their new friendship from a bottle of the mayor's best sherry.

Broderick had cunningly delayed long enough to be invited to dinner, and there he once more met Zetta. If the meeting was not a mutual surprise it seemed to be, for the plotter expressed himself to that effect, and Miss Willis was both surprised and sorry to find him a guest in their house.

To a certain degree he had scored a success, for he had gained admission to the house which sheltered his new charmer, but he was sharp-eyed enough to see that he had not created a favorable impression with her.

"Never mind," he thought, as he went away. "Birds naturally revolt against captivity, but my fair Zetta will find her struggles all in vain. I've set out to make her Mrs. John Broderick, and in my dictionary there's no such word as fail. While Mildred is alienating Ralston and his wife, and laying the foundation for breaking up their home, I'll be subjugating the charming Zetta. Victory shall be mine!"

Five hours later the Buzzard brothers were eating supper in their house on Sugar-Loaf's top. They had been mining nearly all day, and as there were rich deposits of gold on the peak, they seldom worked without something to show for it.

On the present occasion their collection of the precious metal was piled on the table between them as they ate.

At one side their picks leaned against the wall, and, just above them, their belts hung on pegs. The afternoon was warm, and as no

enemy had ever come to the Roost, and none was expected, they had hung the belts carelessly up with their weapons still in them.

"One day o' ther three gone," said Bill Buzzard, as he cut off a huge slice of meat and laid it between two slices of bread.

"Wonder what Hotspur thinks about it?" asked Jack, with a grim smile.

"I'll bet my head she's shakin' in her boots," added Tom.

"Let her shake!" retorted Bill, biting viciously at his sandwich. "Ther place is goin' ter be a graveyard, afore I git through with it."

"Remember what you said about Mona," interpolated Dave.

"What'd I say?"

"She's not ter be harmed."

"If I said so, it goes that way?"

"Didn't you say so?" Dave slowly asked.

"Mebbe."

"Look hyar," said the younger brother, sharply, "I ain't ter be treated ez a boyee or a nigger. When you talk ter me, Bill Buzzard, I want ye ter talk business, an' you'll do it or I leave ther outfit!"

Bill's sandwich stopped half-way to his mouth, wavered, and was then laid down. Jack and Tom never disputed his authority. From the days when he learned to walk alone he had been "boss" among the Buzzard brothers. Jack and Tom always obeyed him, and when, as in the present case, he saw fit to be non-committal, they let it go at that and waited his royal pleasure. When he saw fit to speak, he spoke, and not before.

But his younger brother—this Dave, who was not yet twenty-three years of age—was not like Jack and Tom. Bill could not understand him. The boy had a will of his own; a will which, of late, often came in conflict with that of his eldest brother.

Bill saw his absolute monarchy trembling on its throne.

"What d'ye mean?" he asked.

"I reckon I spoke plain enough," Dave answered.

"So ye want ter leave ther outfit. Mebbe ye want ter go an' hang 'round Mona, ez you used ter do in old times."

Dave flushed; he had been touched in his one sensitive part. In his opinion, his "softness" toward his sister was his one weakness; he deemed it a weakness to care for a woman; but Mona had been a kind sister to him in the past, and, when her other brothers would have turned like wolves upon her, he stood like a rock in their path.

He cared not how soon Hotspur City was made a graveyard, but Mona must be spared.

"You lie, an' you know it, Bill Buzzard," he hotly retorted. "Mona has cast us off, an' when she did that she ceased ter be a sister o' mine. No; I ain't goin' ter her, an' I'll lick ther man that says I be; but you've gin' your word, Bill, that she shan't be injured, an' I won't hev no waverin'. But ther main p'int is, when I ask ye a fair question, I want a fair answer, an' I'm goin' ter hev it!"

The sturdy rebellion cut Bill Buzzard more than he would have liked the others to know, but he could be wise when his interests were at stake, and he did not want the number of the Buzzard brothers to be lessened until his oath against Hotspur was fulfilled; so he resolved to swallow his rebuff, making the mental reservation that, at an early day, fist and muscle should decide whether he or his younger brother was to be leader of the Buzzards.

Jack helped him out of his dilemma.

"You're settin' Bill wrong, Dave," he said, as mildly as his nature would allow. "We don't mean ter go back on our words. We'll spar' Mona."

"Yas," said Bill, "we will keep that promise, an' now, ther question is, how be you on ther game ag'in' Hotspur, Dave?"

"I say, death an' destruction ter Hotspur!" the youngest brother answered.

"Mebbe you're ready ter do your part."

"Haven't I said so?" fiercely demanded Dave. "Ef you're hard o' hearin', I say, ag'in, put me any work in ther game, I'm ready ter do my part ter make Hotspur a graveyard!"

"Good! Ye're ther kind o' a man I like."

Bill reached forward and clasped the other's hand. It was a Judas act, but he was pleased at Dave's course, and the giant brothers must remain united until after their vendetta was ended.

"If the grip ain't private, perhaps you'll let me chip in!"

It was a new voice which sounded from the door, and a quiet voice at that, but the Buzzards bounded to their feet like startled wolves. Each face was turned toward the point from which sounded the voice, and they saw—

Colorado Rube!

He stood just inside the threshold, where the last rays of the setting sun wrapped him in a yellow mantle, and his face was as calm and careless as though he was in Independence Hall with a hundred stout men at his back.

No weapon was visible, and he had the appearance of a man who had dropped in for a friendly call.

A deep, terrible exclamation fell from Bill

Buzzard's lips, following a hush of utter amazement, and he made one stride toward the pegs where hung his revolvers, but Rube thrust forward his hands and, somehow, a revolver shook out of each sleeve and came into place in his white hands.

"Halt!"

He spoke but one word, and his voice was not raised above its ordinary pitch, but there was an incisiveness, a steel-like ring about it, which, coupled with the fact that two revolver muzzles bore upon him, told Bill Buzzard that it would not be wise to dare his wrath.

He halted.

"That's right," said the Strong Arm of Hotspur, coolly. "I like to see a man know when to stop, and you strike me as being a wise person."

There was no answer. The Buzzards were like wolves held at bay, and their faces expressed the darkest passion known to man, but they were practically helpless. Their weapons hung in their belts, and Colorado Rube "held the drop." To attempt to reach the weapons was to court certain death; he could not miss them at that distance.

On his own part, he had not revealed himself until he knew what ground was beneath his feet, and, knowing, he felt able to cope with all. Brave, keen-eyed, alert and a sure shot, he had often before taken as great odds and come out of the press victoriously.

"You'll do me a favor by resuming your seat, Bill," he added, in his usual even tones. "Your face has a hungry look which is not agreeable. Who knows but your quarrel with Hotspur has driven you to the terrible necessity of being a cannibal? Sit down, Bill; sit down!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GIANTS ARE BEARDED IN THEIR LAIR.

BILL BUZZARD, wrong-headed and obstinate as he was, was not incapable of drawing a conclusion, and he had found out that Colorado Rube meant business every time he announced his views; the affair at Independence Hall had shown that.

Consequently, when Rube said "Sit down!" his brother-in-law obeyed, but he did so slowly and sullenly, and there was a look in his eyes that was like lightning playing along the edge of dark thunder-clouds. If Bill had been angry inauguration night, he was wild now; the Buzzard brothers were bearded in their den.

"I don't want to seem brash," said Rube, in an even voice, "but it is my wish that you four gentlemen keep your seats. It will be to our mutual advantage. In this connection, I'll trouble you to observe that I hold the drop, and to avoid unpleasantness I'll keep it."

"You don't know what ye're doin'," gasped Bill. "I'll have your life fur this!"

"Don't be so modest, Bill. Ask for the earth."

"You'll git six feet on't."

"Probably I shall, about fifty years hence, but not now. Seriously, I don't want any trouble with any of you, and my sole object in putting out my Smith & Wessons is to keep the peace. You are the brothers of my wife, and, as such, I want to be on terms of neutrality, if nothing more."

"Mona is no longer our sister," interrupted Dave.

"She was born your sister, and your sister she will remain as long as you and she live. The ties of blood can't be repudiated by a word. Further than this, she wishes you all well. You have disowned her, but she is still your friend."

"We won't hev her friendship!" cried Jack.

"You can't help it."

"We'll do that which'll stop it."

"What, for instance?"

"Kill you!"

"I don't believe it. I am not going to be killed, and you may as well throw up your vendetta and be decent. I have no grudge against you, and you have no reason to hate me."

"You stole Mona!" hotly cried Dave.

"Pardon me, but I did nothing of the kind. I married her, according to the way of the world, but you never had reason to sour on me. Am I not a man of knife and revolver, a man of the wide West, like the rest of you?"

"Ef you think you kin work us over by 'ily words you're almighty mistaken," broke in Bill, recovering speech at last. "I see how 'tis; Hotspur is skeered, an' you've come hyar ter beg off, ez cowards always do."

"I'm not here to speak for Hotspur, but, speaking only for myself, I'll say I'm not frightened in the least."

The Buzzards were in a towering rage. Their faces expressed a bitter hatred which would have appalled a man less brave, and though the unwavering revolvers held them back from instant action, they were like panthers crouched for a spring.

Confronting them, the Strong Arm of Hotspur stood as unmoved as though they were his best friends. His face was calm, his voice was even and moderate, and only for the fact that nothing escaped his eagle eyes, one might have thought him as indifferent as he seemed.

"Critter," said Bill Buzzard, huskily, "you've got ther drop now, an' it's your turn ter

cackle, but you'll find you're sowin' seed that'll bring ye death fur a crop. No man kin bully me an' live; Bill Buzzard is made o' different stuff."

"I don't want to bully you. All I want is a frank talk, and I take the only means to secure it. There is no reason why you should be chagrined, for this is a private matter. Hotspur City don't know I am here, and I shall never tell them of my visit."

"Right ye be; you never'll see ther town ag'in. We'll dig yer grave right close ter this door."

"Don't cook your hare till you catch him, Bill. But, this talk is foolish. Last night you nailed a proclamation to the door of Independence Hall—and a most sanguinary document it was—and as we have no use for any such thing, I have come to Sugar-Loaf to return it."

So saying, Rube drew from his pocket the placard we have before mentioned, and, advancing, laid it upon the table.

"Respectfully declined!" he quietly added.

"I thought ye didn't speak for Hotspur," growled Bill.

"I do not, but I am the mayor's secretary, and I thought the best place for such a blood-thirsty proclamation was with the authors."

Bill Buzzard crumpled the paper and flung it toward Rube's face, but it was warded off by a careless motion.

"That don't count," composedly observed the Strong Arm of Hotspur. "Now, my business is about finished, and I will only delay long enough to say there is no reason for your hatred. You have never been deceived; the election matter was—"

"Don't go over that ground ag'in," said Bill. "Thar has been enough palaver already. I reckon we are able ter run our own machine, without any o' your advice or help. I say Hotspur City shall be a graveyard. Put that in yer pipe, but don't give me any more cheap talk. I'm lookin' ter see you go."

"You shall be accommodated, but you must not get to thinking I shall allow you to seize your revolvers the instant I turn my back, and blaze away at me as though I was a target. Not by considerable, Bill. I shall take your weapons outside the door, but you will find them close at hand. It is growing dark, you see, and I shall place them where there will be sufficient delay to give me a fair chance."

He moved toward where the revolvers swung idly from the pegs, but Bill bounded to his feet. "Let 'em alone!" he vociferated.

"Pardon me, but I decline to leave them where you can open fire at will."

"I'll hev them or yer life!" shouted the desperado.

He bounded forward, resolved to risk all, and Rube might easily have dropped him in his tracks. Instead, he thrust out one foot skillfully and, avoiding the rush, sent Bill rolling on the floor.

The remaining brothers had bounded to their feet, but Rube tossed the four belts across his left shoulder with as many quick motions and faced them all.

"Halt!" he cried, sharply. "I am done with fooling. Keep away, or I'll shoot to kill!"

His voice rung out through the cabin with an inflection which told that he was in dead earnest, and the rush they contemplated was checked before it began. Giants and bravos though they were, they had no desire to throw away their lives, and they felt that Colorado Rube would keep his word.

"It is time we come to an understanding," he added. "I don't want trouble with you, and would be most reluctant to pull trigger on men my wife owns as brothers, but I will not be butchered by you. Bear that in mind. If it comes to a question of your lives or mine, I shall shoot. Now, I do not intend you any harm; I am only looking for a safe retreat; but I warn you not to stand in my way."

Bill had slowly gained his feet again, and he looked at the Strong Arm with a terrible glare. He had never hated him so much as at that moment, but he realized that Rube "held the drop," and that any further attempt to worst him would only add to their discomfiture and fill the cup of bitterness to overflowing.

"Go!" he hissed. "Git outer my sight ez quick ez yer legs will take yer, but don't go away laughin' in yer sleeve. Bill Buzzard still lives, an' I swar that I'll kill ye yet ez I would a wolf. Think o' me by day, dream o' me by night, never forgit me; for I'll devote my hull life ter killin' ye, an' when you least suspect it, ther hand o' Bill Buzzard will be at yer throat. Go!"

He stretched out one brawny arm, and Rube, who realized the folly of further words, bowed and simply answered:

"I am going!"

He backed to the door, never taking his gaze from them, and then disappeared from their view.

Jack, Tom and Dave looked at their elder brother, but he tersely said:

"Stay whar ye be!"

Then he sat down and, leaning his head on his hands, seemed to relapse into a statue. The other brothers looked at each other significant-

ly. Knowing his hot, passionate, revengeful nature as they did, they had some idea of the tempest of passion which was raging in his breast.

It was five minutes before he stirred. Then he arose and went deliberately outside, but soon returned bearing the belts. Not so much as a revolver had been abstracted, and he laid them on the table quietly.

This done, he spoke in a deep, rumbling voice:

"Death will be too good fur Rube Ralston arter this. Ther revolver ends all a man's troubles quickly, but ther blow that teches his heart, an' does not kill, t'ars deep. Ther way ter strike Ralston is through his wife. She shall not be killed; I have promised that, an' now I don't want ter; but we will abduct an' hide her whar he can't find her. That's ther way ter make him writhe, an' he shall find that when he trod on Bill Buzzard he raised a storm that'll only eend when he is crushed, heart-broken an' dead. That shall now be our game!"

CHAPTER XIV.

DAVE BUZZARD MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

THERE is little to record in the progress of Mildred Fenton's scheme against the Ralston's, and yet the progress was steady. Of course, aiming to run their lives by insidious arts, she must first of all win a tolerably sure footing in the household, and this she proceeded to do.

Without assuming excessive innocence, which would have at once betrayed her to Rube, who knew a person of worldly experience at sight, she did assume an air of friendliness and good-natured frankness which worked far better.

If the Ralstons suspected she was scheming and unscrupulous, there was nothing to show for it in their conduct toward her, and she believed herself well established.

Not the least cause for congratulation was the fact that Neal Bishop had left Hotspur. The plotters held a secret over his head which had chained his tongue, but, as Mildred expressed it, "there was no knowing when such a weak fool would tell all," and she felt a good deal safer when he went away. She had learned enough of the Strong Arm of Hotspur so that she did not care to have him know she was a traitor in his home.

Twice she had seen Broderick, but it was always secretly, and no one suspected they had ever spoken. Between the two there was no bond except that of crime, and had she known he was trying to fascinate Zetta Willis, the fact would have caused her no vexation.

Broderick was fully in earnest, as we have seen, and though he was dimly conscious of the fact that it was not a good plan to have too many schemes in operation at once, he was resolved to win Zetta. Her beauty intoxicated him, and with the strange inconsistency of vice, he told himself she was greatly to be desired for her goodness.

He had gained a foothold at Mumford's by his device, and he congratulated himself upon the fact, but he felt a little uneasiness when, on the following morning, he received a note sent by a Chinaman, in which the mayor asked him to come at once to Independence Hall and meet his secretary—"a man well worth knowing."

Broderick gnawed his mustache. He did not agree with the mayor; he very much preferred not to meet Ralston, for he knew the man had a sharp eye, and he was afraid he would see through his mask.

After due meditation he concluded to run the risk, however, and he put on his hat and walked over to the hall.

The board of aldermen had not yet arrived, and the mayor and his clerk were seated alone at the same table which had played so important a part the night of Mr. Mumford's inauguration.

Rube looked none the worse for the exciting scene through which he passed the previous night, and though he had told Mumford he was going to take the Buzzards' placard back to them, no one suspected he had been at the Roost.

The two younger men were introduced, and then a general conversation ensued in regard to the branch road Broderick asserted the Denver & Rio Grande intended to build to Hotspur. In five minutes he clearly perceived that Ralston was not easily deceived. He knew a rail road would not pay, at least not for some time to come, if put through, and he could not see why so successful a corporation as that mentioned wished to engage in the enterprise.

Broderick was on the defensive, and he talked as well as he could; but he was all the while dreading some question which would unmask him.

His knowledge of the affairs of the Denver & Rio Grande, even of the names of the officers, was limited, and a few well-directed shots would betray him.

He considered it a fortunate interruption when four men entered. Three of them were Hotspur's aldermen, the fourth was Makepeace Mullin.

Of course, the conference was broken up, as Broderick made it a condition that only the two men to whom he had revealed the railroad

project should know anything about it; and after being introduced to the aldermen in a complimentary way, he soon excused himself and left the hall.

Makepeace Mullin had been appointed janitor of the temple of justice, and as Broderick passed him, as he stood at the door, he favored the tall stranger with a prolonged stare.

Broderick paid no attention to him and went out, but Mullin followed to the threshold and gazed after him, as he walked down the street until he reached the Old Rye.

Then the janitor returned to his place, but it was noticeable that his air was not so dignified as that he had worn since he became a public official, and he often rubbed his chin in a meditative way.

When the forenoon's business was done, he accosted Colorado Rube:

"I say, Mr. Secretary, who was that buddin' plant that went out with a big mustache on his lip?"

The question was not so complicated but that Rube understood it, and he replied that he was a business man who thought of locating at Hotspur.

"Broderick!" muttered the janitor. "Ther name is new ter me, but I've see'd ther man afore."

"Where?" Ralston quickly asked.

"Jest whar I wanter know. Ez Socrates used fur ter observe: 'What is it I see, but can't ketch onter?' I've see'd ther critter afore, but I can't place his physicalognomy."

"Think again."

"I will. I'll harrer up ther cornfield o' memory till ev'ry bit o' turf is ground ez fine ez snuff. I'm goin' ter know whar I've see'd him."

"Are you favorably impressed?"

"Favor'ble thunder! D'ye s'pose I like ther looks o' a thunder cloud that is done black, turned over an' br'iled all ter nothin'? He looks like Cap'n Kidd, he does."

"You'll do me a favor by placing the man, if you can. I am not favorably impressed, either. He may be all right, but he has a hang-dog face and— Well, try to recollect where you saw him; and when you do, report to me."

Ralston walked on, leaving Makepeace in a brown study.

"Queer I can't recollect, but 'Where's thar's a will thar's a way,' ez Socrates used fer ter observe. I'll dig his face up outer ther grave o' oblivion, ef I break a dozen spades in doin' it."

Zetta Willis was rambling outside the village. To her, the open air was a necessity. A great city would have been a prison; the foothills of the eternal mountains furnished a field for all her love of nature, and the uncontaminated air of the true world, as she regarded it.

That day she had wandered sufficiently near the wild peak known as Bull's Head to strike the broken country which began as its base was neared, and she finally paused on the brink of a cleft in the earth, the bottom of which was veiled in intense darkness.

She raised a small stone and let it drop in the chasm. There was a pause, and then a sullen splash far below. She started back with a little shiver, at the idea of falling over, and as she did so a voice sounded at her elbow.

"Not a pleasant place ter jump inter!"

She wheeled abruptly and stood facing a remarkable man. He stood within six feet of her, leaning on a rifle, but he towered above her like a veritable Goliath. He had a splendid form, and his face was bold and rather comely, but he had a lawless air which she did not fail to read.

She did not at first recognize him, and thought she had never seen him before, and though she was really alarmed, she faced him with a composure her courageous nature enabled her to retain, and which she deemed her wisest course under the circumstances.

"You come from ther town, I take it," he resumed, as she did not at once answer.

"Yes, sir."

"What be they doin' thar?"

"Nothing unusual, so far as I know."

"Hain't see'd no signs o' military preparation, hey?"

"Of what, sir?"

"War."

"I don't understand."

"Mebbe I kin make myself plain; I ginerally succeed in doin' so when I try," was the grim reply. "Be they gettin' ready to march ag'in ther Buzzard brothers?"

It was a simple inquiry, but it caused the color to recede from Zetta's face with a swift rush. The mention of that name had been enough to reveal the questioner's identity; the youngest of the Buzzard brothers stood before her.

The girl recoiled as she would have done from a tiger. True, she knew and loved the sister of the giants, but she had never been able to realize that such a relationship existed, and she had all the common fear of the owners of the Roost. A cold sneer crossed Dave's face.

"What's ther matter?" he asked. "D'ye think I wanter eat yer up? Wal, you hev got a pooty face, a right pooty one, but, Lord! I

reckon Dave Buzzard ain't no spooney counter-jumper. Git some color back in yer cheeks an' talk, will ye?"

"What shall I say?" asked Zetta, trying to subdue the tremor in her voice.

"What be they doin' at Hotspur?"

"Nothing new, sir. Everything is as usual, so far as I know."

"No sign o' an attack on Sugar Loaf?"

"I have seen none, sir."

"That's queer! Who be you, anyway?"

"My name is Zetta Willis, and I am the friend of Mona Ralston."

Dave laughed grimly.

"You think that name is a safeguard, do ye? Wal, you're wrong, mightily wrong. Mona was my sister once, but she ain't now, an'—"

"She still loves you," interrupted Zetta.

"Bah!" retorted Dave, with a prolonged utterance, and putting his hand on his stomach as though the idea made him sick. "Don't try that dodge on me; it won't ketch onter an old sojer like me. But, gal, you're safe enough; your pooty face is ther best protection you kin have, an' ez it's likely you hev been tellin' ther truth, you kin toddle home ez soon ez you choose, like a good girl."

The giant puffed out his cheeks and grimaced as though he thought himself remarkably facetious, but, before Zetta could answer, he added:

"But, afore ye go, you must give me one kiss!"

CHAPTER XV.

ZETTA'S CHAMPION.

DAVE BUZZARD had no earthly object just then except to annoy the girl. As has been said, he considered it a weakness to care for a woman, but the alarm pictured on Zetta's face aroused the natural element of viciousness in his disposition, and he resolved that she should not be able to return to his sister and say she had met him and received good usage.

It would destroy his prestige as a hard character.

Zetta shrunk back, but he promptly advanced upon her, and with the chasm on one side and his burly form on the other, she had no chance for flight.

"Oul' sir," she implored, "don't touch me. Have mercy!"

He laughed mockingly.

"I reckon ye don't exactly know me. I'm Dave Buzzard, an' I'm a terror, I am. I eat three pounds o' raw beef ev'ry mornin' fur breakfast."

Dave, having never dwelt directly in a western town, was not exactly at home with fabulous metaphor and boast, but he tried his best to sustain his character as a "tough."

"Let me go!" she said, feverishly. "I am Mona's friend, and I never harmed you. Let me go, and I'll leave here at once."

"I don't doubt it, my pink o' loveliness, but Simon don't say 'thumb's down.' Come ter my arms!"

He spread them out in a way which left room for several like her, but the drama was suddenly and unexpectedly interrupted.

"Hold, there, you dog! Advance another step and I'll kill you as I would a wolf!"

Dave swung around on his heel like a top, and as he did so his rifle came up with the hammer shooting back with a double click. Not far away stood a man with a cocked revolver, and it is doubtful who would have got in the first shot, but the giant no sooner saw the new-comer than he laughed aloud, dropped his rifle-hammer and grounded the weapon.

He had a faculty for remembering faces, and though he did not know the name of the man with the revolver, he remembered him as the same one who had interfered with Bill Buzzard and been so completely knocked out the night of Mumford's inauguration.

It was Neal Bishop.

"Hallo, Pony," he said, with grim facetiousness, "when did you leave yer cradle?"

"None of your business!" retorted Bishop. "I want you to let that lady alone."

"Children have ter be humored, an' now I hear yer rattle, o' course I won't tech ther pink o' prettiness."

"You had better not."

"Ef I did, I s'pose ye would rise in yer wrath an' scatter me ter ther four winds, wouldn't ye, Pony?"

"I'd put a bullet through ye."

"Be you sure yer pop-gun is loaded, little boyee?" asked Dave, the aggravating grin never leaving his face.

"Sneer on, you big ruffian. I am aware that you weigh something like sixty pounds more than I do, but here is the weapon which makes all men equal."

Bishop preserved his coolness remarkably. He had never been a coward, and, of late, circumstances had made him utterly reckless. He knew he would be only a child in Dave's hands if it came to a grapple, but he did not intend that it should, and he tapped his revolver as he spoke with a resolute air.

"I think I've seed yer afore, Pony," Dave mockingly continued.

"It makes no difference whether you have or

not. What we are now talking about is the present case. I tell you that if you molest that lady, I'll put a bullet through you. Stand aside and let her pass!"

"On one condition. That is—"

"There are no conditions about it. I tell you to stand aside. If you don't do it before I count four I shall fire, and I'll aim to kill. One!"

"Take her place an' she may canter off ez soon ez she pleases."

"Two!"

Dave's smile did not fade a particle.

"Take good aim, Pony!"

"Three!"

Then Dave moved. Without turning his head he sprang backward, seized Zetta and whirled her round like a flash for a shield. It was a critical moment, for Bishop's finger was already pressing the trigger. If he discharged the weapon with good aim, the bullet would strike, not Buzzard, but the girl.

Crack!

The weapon spoke, but the bullet went wild. Unable to check the pressure of his finger, Bishop had managed to turn the barrel slightly, and Zetta escaped a danger even greater than the one from which he had tried to save her.

"So much fur your marksmanship," sarcastically laughed the giant, still holding Zetta in front of him. "Now, what d'ye think o' that?"

He thrust his own revolver forward, and Neal, unable to fire without danger of hitting the girl, saw the deadly weapon bearing full upon him. He was facing death, and he at once decided that there was no chance for him, but he deliberately folded his arms and laughed recklessly.

"Blaze away!" he directed.

A new expression crossed the giant's face, and he looked more keenly at the man he held at his mercy.

"Mebbe you don't know who I be," he said.

"You are a big ruffian, named Buzzard."

"Ef you know so much, you orter know I kill men fur less than that."

Bishop cast his revolver on the ground, almost at his adversary's feet.

"Don't waste any more time in preaching," he recklessly answered. "All I'll ask is that you'll blaze away. I don't care a picayune for life, and all your ugly ways can't frighten me. Here I am—a good target. Blaze away!"

He meant every word he said, and sincerely hoped Dave would obey. Life was valueless to him with the mill-stone about his neck which was there; the sooner it ended, the better.

But his very recklessness was a recommendation to Dave Buzzard's respect. He could not understand how any man could regard life as of no value, and what was really despair he took for real bravery.

He pushed Zetta away from him so violently that she almost fell.

"Go!" he said, tersely.

Then he flung his own revolver beside that of Bishop's.

"Pard," he exclaimed, "you're a man arter my own heart—"

He paused abruptly. The moment Neal saw the change in the situation, his mood changed. He had another revolver in his pocket, and a feverish desire to get even with this man who had scoffed at him, assailed him. He drew the weapon with a jerk so quick that a professional might have admired it.

Dave Buzzard saw the act, and the suspicion flashed upon him that he had been tricked; that all Bishop had done had been an artifice to turn the tables.

The giant uttered a roar and sprang toward his fallen revolver, but Neal did not wait for him to recover it.

He had his weapon at a bead, and he pulled the trigger.

Dave abruptly arose to a nearly erect position and then staggered back. Bishop fired again, and then the giant, blindly catching at vacancy, staggered over the edge of the chasm and disappeared from view.

Neal was master of the field, but his quick victory surprised him not a little. He hesitated, and then advanced to the abyss. Only a black vacancy met his view; there was no sign of Dave Buzzard.

It was not until he was satisfied that the fellow had really disappeared that he again thought of Zetta. He looked up and saw her just disappearing in the distance. Thoroughly alarmed, she had seized the first chance to escape from the vicinity.

Bishop smiled grimly.

"Well, I'm master of the field, anyway, and deserted by foe and friend. There's no knowing when another Buzzard will show up, so I think I'll get back to Bull's Head as soon as possible."

And he started for the peak.

"I've got it, pard; I've got it!"

Colorado Rube was walking quietly along the street when these words were excitedly spoken just behind him, and he turned around and saw Makepeace Mullin in pursuit.

"You'd better consult a physician then, at once," said the Strong Arm, coolly.

"I had? What fur?"

"Hydrophobia is dangerous."

"Oul' I didn't mean I'd got *that*. No; I referred ter Broderick. I knowed I'd place his phiz; ez Socrates used fer ter observe, 'Ther mind's ther standard o' ther man; an' mine is an uncommon active organ.'"

"If you've settled the matter, spit out your information."

"Wal, I seed him in Leadville, two year ago. He was a-gamblin', he was, an' men said he was ther wu'st man at that biz that Colorado knowed. What I seen showed him a scoundrel o' ther darkest dye, ez Socrates would put it."

"What did you see?"

"Speak soft," said the janitor, as a man approached, "for I can't prezactly prove what I say, an' ez a public official, I must be keeful an' not be indicated fur slander."

"Have no fear. Just blow your bugle without delay, and I'll see that it's all right."

"Wal, ther facts o' the case are jest hyar: Ther night I seed him he had a victim, a mere boy, an' he perceeded ter pluck off ev'ry feather ther poor chap had. He did it, too; he cleaned him out o' ev'ry dollar he had, an' then ther poor boyee begun ter see whar he stood. He got ez pale ez a ghost, an' told ther winner how he had worked three year fur what he lost that night, an' how he had an old mother an' two sisters in Ohio he was goin' home ter, and he begged Black Burke—that war his name then—to give it back."

"Did he do it?"

"Did he? I reckon not. No; he laughed at ther idee, an' while ther boyee, in a passion, accused him o' gettin' him drunk ter induce him ter play, begun scoopin' up ther money. Burke laughed ag'in, an' then ther boyee drew his revolver. 'Twas ther wu'st thing he could 'a' done; he had ter deal with a man a heap quicker on ther shoot than he was. Ther was a report, an' then ther boyee lay on the floor, shot through. Ther gambler turned on ther crowd an' asked them ter b'ar witness it was done in self-defense. Ther was them ez hankered ter pick it up, but Burke's friends raised their voices in his behalf, an' ez ther other seen ther odds war ag'in' them they let it drop. Ther boyee didn't die, but he laid abed six weeks, an' then went home a physical wreck, sent thar by ther charity of ther decent miners. That's what I know about Black Burke."

"I'm not surprised," said Ralston. "I marked him as a blackleg the moment I saw him, and now I am convinced that he is not in Hotspur for any good."

"Ez Socrates used fer ter say, 'A man may grin an' grin, an' be a durned villain still.'"

Rube observed that he would keep an eye on Mr. John Broderick, and then resumed his way.

He had gone but a short distance when he saw something which brought him to a sudden halt. It was the sight of Broderick and Zetta engaged in conversation. The girl's back was toward him, but the man was talking animatedly, and Rube did not doubt but the conversation was one of mutual interest.

A frown crossed his face. He liked Zetta, and knew her to be a fine girl, and as he remembered the incident Mullin had told him, he was seized with intense indignation, and strode toward the pair.

"He shall not make her a victim, as he did the boy," he muttered. "I'll stop it if I have to flog him!"

CHAPTER XVI.

COLORADO RUBE RUNS AGAINST A ROCK.

RALSTON had taken but a few steps when he realized that his premeditated course would be a rash one, and he came to a halt. In the first place, there was a possibility that Makepeace Mullin had been mistaken; secondly, even if it was true, Hotspur City would not thank him for giving mortal offense to a representative of the Denver & Rio Grande; and, last, but not least, an open rupture was not in keeping with the Strong Arm's usual way of managing delicate cases.

He came to a halt, but, so strongly did he feel at seeing the man on such pleasant terms with Zetta, he resolved to give him a hint, let the consequences be what they might, and warn him not to molest Miss Willis.

The chance was soon given, for Zetta left Broderick and hurried toward her home, and then the latter walked in Rube's direction.

The two men looked at each other without any sign of love in their expression, but Broderick managed to force a smile.

"Done with the office for to-day?" he lightly asked.

"Yes; I am my own man now, and if you are not in a hurry I have a word to say to you."

Broderick detected an undercurrent of menace in the quiet voice, but he readily replied:

"I have no business at present, except to listen to you. Say on!"

"The subject is a somewhat delicate one, and I wish to say in advance that it is to be regarded as strictly between us, and not in any way to affect your standing with Hotspur City in a business sense."

"Quite right. I will so regard it."

The menacing cloud grew darker, but Brod-

erick saw no reason why he should fear Colorado Rube.

"I saw you talking with Miss Willis a moment ago."

"Yes. She is a charming girl."

"You say truthfully, and she is as good as she is charming. She is, as you are doubtless aware, the niece of Mayor Mumford. She is also the fast friend of my wife—I may say she is like a sister to her—and we have a deep interest in her. In point of fact, I may say that I take the place, to a degree, that a brother would occupy if she had one."

"You are a fortunate fellow."

There was a slight sneer in Broderick's voice, but it passed unheeded and Rube quietly continued:

"Having said this, you will understand why I say what is to follow. To begin: What do you know of a man named Black Burke?"

Broderick started. He was a man of iron nerves, but the inquiry had come unexpectedly, and it had hit him far harder than the Strong Arm of Hotspur knew. To Broderick, the question indicated that his plot against Ralston was known, and it produced a feeling of consternation. He was a man of great resources, however, and he rallied with commendable promptness.

"What do you know of him?" he slowly asked.

"I have reason to believe you are he."

"Well, what of it?"

"Simply this: if you are Black Burke, you are not a fit associate for Zetta Willis."

Ralston expected to see his companion flush with anger, but the criticism passed unheeded. Broderick's mind was all on his warfare against the Strong Arm, and, strange as it was, he began to believe Rube did not know all.

But what was he driving at?

"If you'll make yourself a little clearer, I'll try to answer," he replied.

"I have explained my interest in Miss Willis, and I need only say that she must not associate with you without knowing you once figured as Black Burke, the gambler."

Broderick drew himself erect. It was clear Rube had in some way learned certain events of his past life, but he did not know the most important features. He had only to meet him as regarded Zetta. That was enough, anyway, for he saw his plans in that quarter menaced and an angry gleam appeared in his eyes.

"Mayor Mumford does not seem to share your prejudices," he answered.

"That is because he knows nothing about you, and if we can settle this matter satisfactorily, I prefer to say nothing to him. As an agent of the Denver & Rio Grande, I desire you to continue to hold amicable relations with Mr. Mumford. Let this other matter be between us."

"Do I understand you forbid my speaking to the girl?" demanded Broderick, with a sneer.

"Mr. Broderick, I can read human faces, and human actions, and, to express it bluntly, you were making love to Miss Willis a moment ago. What she thinks of you I do not know, but, if necessary, I shall tell her you are Black Burke, the gambler."

"You had better not interfere with my business."

"Your anger is the best proof that you are open to suspicion," quietly observed Ralston. "Now, listen to me. There is no need of trouble between us. Treat Miss Willis with cool politeness and your secret is safe, but if you try to make a conquest, I shall reveal your true character."

"It is none of your business!"

"I have before explained my interest in the lady. If that is not sufficient, allow me to say I shall make it my business."

Broderick was thoroughly angry, and he now looked at only one side of the question. The man he hated was interfering between him and the woman he had taken a fancy to.

"Look here!" he retorted, "you are scarcely the man to preach. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. What of your own past?"

Colorado Rube had drawn a cigar and bit off the tip. Before answering he coolly struck a match and lit it.

"I am not under discussion," he carelessly observed.

"By Jupiter! you'll find you are!" cried Broderick, hotly. "A fine fellow you are to rake up records, but don't you think your own is a sealed book. I can tell a story that'll make Black Burke stand out as an angel of light. Once upon a time, and not so many years ago, there was a celebrated road-agent down in Arizona who was known as Captain Redspur. He had the reputation of being the greatest cut-throat that ever operated in the Territory."

The Strong Arm of Hotspur stood with one hand resting on the boulder beside which they stood, and with the other he removed the cigar from his mouth and carelessly knocked off the tip of ashes. His strong face betrayed no interest in the narrative; though Broderick spoke slowly, and watched him sharply, he did not have the satisfaction of seeing him quail.

"He was a fiend incarnate," Broderick con-

tinued, "and as town after town offered a reward for his capture, quite a sum began to roll up. Men hunted him. Some of them found him, but found him to their sorrow, for he put them to death. Arizona went wild and the name of Captain Redspur was accursed."

"I suppose you have an object in telling this," said Rube, coolly, as the narrator paused, "but I fail to connect, thus far. Perhaps Redspur was another of your assumed names?"

"Perhaps not, but you shall see. Finally Redspur was taken. The miners went wild. No one spoke of a trial; it was a case for Judge Lynch. Trees being scarce, some of the miners proceeded to run out of a second-story window a beam on which the desperado could be hung. Afterward they were going to the jail and bring him out. They never did it. Just as the beam was fairly arranged there was a wild yell and Redspur came shooting down the street, mounted on a splendid horse, a revolver in each hand. He charged them; he burst through. He escaped, but he left four dead men behind him so that the town need not forget that he lived. An interesting narrative, Mr. Ralston, eh?"

"Decidedly," said Rube, coolly.

"After that they only had his deeds to remember him by. He appeared no more on the trail. His experience had evidently shown him that the miners meant business, so he finally withdrew from business, himself. What do you suppose became of him?"

"Possibly you are he."

"Hardly, my dear sir. No; he came to this town and blossomed out as Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur City!"

Broderick ended with a vicious, disagreeable laugh, but Ralston remained unmoved.

"I think you are drunk!" he tersely observed.

"Better for you that it was no more, but I am in my right mind and prepared to buck against you to the last gasp. You are ex-Captain Redspur, and it will be just as well for you to let me alone hereafter."

"Your charge is ridiculous—"

"Wait! When Redspur was captured, he received a wound on his left arm, between the wrist and elbow. If you are he that scar must be there now, and I defy you to show your arm."

"I am not a showman, and I respectfully decline. Your yarn is too thin to be regarded for a moment; you have told it as a bluff game to keep me off. It won't work. I'm not Captain Redspur and never was, but if you see fit you can stand on the street and proclaim the fact to any, and every, citizen who passes."

"Oh! you're well guarded here, I know, but what if I was to write to Arizona and invite the people up here to look for you?"

"It is the best thing you can do. That'll settle it."

"You're mighty right, it would," said Broderick, with an air of triumph. "See to it I am not forced to do it."

"Your absurd game will not work, and I refuse to talk seriously about it. What I do say, however, is that if you don't let Miss Willis alone, I'll expose you. Good-day!"

Ralston started away, but Broderick laid his hand on his arm.

"Wait!" he said. "I refuse to be bullied by you. I defy you to show your arm and prove whether the scar is there."

"When I put myself on exhibition, it will be in the act of flogging you. See to it you don't deserve it. Go and get sober!"

Once more he started off and Broderick let him go, but on the latter's face was a smile of triumph. As for Rube, he went straight to his own room and, pushing back his sleeve, revealed to his view a long, white scar on his arm, midway between wrist and elbow.

"A curse on the dumb evidence!" he muttered, hoarsely. "That mark may hang me yet!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MOUNTAIN CHASM.

It was nearly dark when Broderick returned to the Old Rye Hotel. He had carefully considered his position and come to the conclusion that he had nothing to fear from Colorado Rube. If the latter revealed the fact that he was Black Burke it did not place him in any closer corner than having to leave Hotspur, while a rope was waiting for Captain Redspur in Arizona if he was ever caught.

The Strong Arm's guns were effectually spiked. When Broderick entered the saloon he found it nearly deserted, and he sauntered up to the clerk's desk and looked carelessly at the register. He did not expect to find any familiar name there, but it was an impulse common to men.

The first glance, however, caused him to start abruptly.

COL. L. C. NELSON, VIRGINIA CITY, NEVADA.

Such was the latest entry on the book, and it was the most startling Broderick could have seen.

Colonel Nelson was one of the peculiar characters of the West. He was a scientist, geologist, botanist and curiosity-seeker, by his own account, and was going all through the country between the Mississippi and Pacific, gathering material for an immense book he intended to publish at a future period.

It will be remembered that it was the fraudulent use of his name which gained Mildred Fenton admission to Ralston's home. Broderick had met the colonel, and he knew he was highly regarded by Colorado Rube, and he accordingly forged the letters we have seen Mildred use to such good advantage.

But the presence of Nelson in Hotspur was a thunderbolt to Broderick. He realized at once that the colonel had come to see Ralston, and the moment the two men met his elaborate scheme would fade to dust and ashes.

He was filled with consternation, but he was a man who believed in fighting to the last, and he was at once on the alert.

What could he do to save himself? Had Nelson seen Rube Ralston?

He turned to the clerk.

"Is Colonel Nelson in his room?" he asked, as carelessly as possible.

"I am not sure, but I think he is. It is No. 24; the one next to yours."

"Thank you; I'll go up and see him."

He turned and slowly ascended the stairs.

"If he is in, and hasn't seen Ralston, I'll take care that he don't see him, if I have to kill the fool. Curse him! why did he come to Hotspur just as my plot was beginning to work so well? What with his coming and the information Ralston has dropped upon, my position is getting decidedly shaky. If the two men have met I shall promptly fold my tent like the Arab and as silently get up and dust."

He walked straight to the door of No. 24 and rapped with a steady hand. A voice directed him to enter, and he pushed the door open. The first person he saw was Colonel Nelson, and a swift glance around the room showed him no one else was there.

The colonel started up from his chair.

"Why, Broderick, is it you? I would as soon have thought of seeing Marius of Carthage. Where did you drop from?"

"From the clouds, which is also your fashion," laughed the plotter, whose hopes had arisen perceptibly.

The two men stood face to face, shaking hands with seeming cordiality. Nelson was a man of middle age, stoutly built, with jet-black hair and long side-whiskers; a rather pleasant, happy-go-lucky sort of man, who looked like one of the kind who easily make friends.

"I suppose we are mutually surprised," he said, "for though I have long since lost sight of you, I hardly expected to find you here. However, a true Western man is liable to turn up at any point between Yuma and Pembina, and here we both are."

"And we meet by chance, the usual way, as some one has been guilty of expressing it," replied Broderick.

They then sat down and continued the conversation, and though Broderick was figuratively on nettles, he managed to appear wholly at his ease. He waited patiently for light on the subject nearest his mind, and it was not long in coming.

"Have you been long in Hotspur?" Nelson asked.

"Just long enough to begin to feel acquainted."

"Ah! Possibly you know a man named Rube Ralston?"

"Oh! yes; he and I are friends. I had a long and pleasant chat with him this afternoon."

The words were no sooner spoken than Broderick was conscious of having expressed himself somewhat strongly. Friendly as the colonel appeared, he knew his present companion was no angel, and his sharp glance indicated that he did not regard him as a very suitable associate for an honest man.

"I came here on purpose to see Ralston," he added, after a pause, "and if you'll direct me, I'll walk over soon."

Broderick looked at his watch.

"He will not be in for an hour yet, but, at the end of that time, I shall be pleased to act as your guide."

The plotter wished it to be fully dark before they went out, for he was resolved to make the journey one of death for Nelson, and they must not be seen together.

An hour passed. Broderick would have detained his intended victim longer; but he saw that he was ready to go, and they arose and left the room together.

"We'll use the rear door," said Broderick, carelessly. "Ralston's house is at the northern side of the town, and it will be our nearest way."

Nelson saw nothing suspicious about this, and they went out without being observed by any of the attaches of the hotel. So far all was going as Broderick wished, and if he could get the colonel outside the village as successfully, there would be nothing to tell how he had so suddenly disappeared.

He began to talk rapidly, to engage Nelson's attention, and led him by the loneliest road he could find. Luck favored him, and they met no one, and the village was soon passed.

It was not until they entered the rocky region at the north that Nelson noticed their route at all. Then he suddenly paused.

"I don't see any houses in this direction," he said.

"There are none," Broderick coolly observed, "but I thought you would like to take a walk."

"I don't care to break my neck over these rocks. No; I'll postpone my ramble until tomorrow," said Nelson, decisively.

"Pardon me; but can't I persuade you to oblige me?"

Broderick spoke in a steel-like voice, and as he did so he thrust a revolver under the colonel's ear.

"Hands up, or you're a dead man!" he sharply added.

It was evidently a complete surprise, and Nelson stood speechless; but when the last order had been repeated, he slowly raised his arms.

"Keep them there," continued Broderick. "If you make a hostile move, or cry for help, I'll pull trigger!"

"What the blazes do you mean?" the colonel demanded.

"I mean that I want your company for a ramble, and I'm going to have it. I don't intend you any harm, though, as I said, if you kick you're a gone coon. I have a story to tell you, colonel, before you see Ralston, and I am going to have an uninterrupted interview."

"Talk away; I will listen."

Nelson did not act alarmed; but it was clear to him that he was in a close corner, and must make the best of what he could not avoid.

"Not here. We are liable to be interrupted at any moment, and a good deal depends on my getting in my story without your mind being prejudiced by others. Ralston and I are not friends, and as I know you and he are, I want to ask justice from you. Do you see the peak at the right? That's Bull's Head, and you'll accommodate me by going that way."

"It's a fine tramp for such a night as this, but I'm one of the most accommodating men in the world and I'll go. Lead the way!"

"Not so, my dear colonel. Go you first, and I'll follow. I know you are no slouch, so I'll repeat, once more, if you play any trick I'll shoot to kill. I follow you, and my revolver will always be at your head. Don't tempt it!"

Nelson shrugged his shoulders.

"You have a terrific cheek, Broderick; you want everything your own way, with the earth thrown in. However, here goes!"

He started off, and Broderick followed in the way he said he would. Few words were spoken by the way. Two or three times the leader looked around, but the revolver was always at his head. He had the will to resent this treatment, but he read his captor's mood and was wise enough to make no offensive movement.

As they went on the character of the country gradually grew rougher, and they neared Bull's Head, but Broderick did not give permission to halt.

The last act in the drama was approaching, but it was not of the kind the plotter had said. He had no story to tell Nelson; he desired no private conversation with him; but he intended to shoot him in the back as soon as opportunity offered.

A suspicion of the truth was in Nelson's mind, and he was looking for a way of escape. Once he began to slowly lower his raised hands, preparatory to a dive into the inside pocket which held his revolver, but Broderick was on the watch and he was promptly notified to keep them well up. Clearly, Nelson's only hope was a dash for life, and he resolved to attempt it, trusting to the darkness to save him from a death-shot.

He made the attempt with celerity surprising in one of his years and bounded away like a deer. Broderick with all his watchfulness, was not prepared for it, and when he fired his first shot it went wild. A curse fell from his lips, and then he fired again with all possible care.

The report sounded, and Nelson threw up his arms and fell.

"Aha!" cried Broderick, "I've done for him!"

He hastened forward, but he did not see the colonel's prostrate form. Instead, a chasm cut the ground at that point, and he realized that the man had fallen down. Whether he had been touched by the bullet he had no means of knowing.

He found a small stone and dropped it down the chasm. There was a sullen splash far below.

For half an hour he hovered around the place, but he was unable to descend, or learn more about it, and in the end he returned to Hotspur City without knowing whether he had really succeeded in forever removing a man who, if living, could ruin all his carefully-laid plans.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BUZZARD BROTHERS' RAID.

THE following morning Bill, Jack and Tom Buzzard were seated at the table in their house, eating breakfast. Dave was absent. Neither of the three had spoken for some time. The day was the last of the three given Hotspur City as a period in which to dread their vengeance, and though they were not hot-headed enough to strike at once, let the situation be what it might, they intended to let no time go to waste.

The silence was broken as the door was flung open and Dave entered. He had been away all night, but this fact surprised them less than his present appearance.

He bore signs of hard usage.

His clothes were wet and mud-covered, his face bore a white, haggard look new to him, and just above one temple was a large, ugly bruise. It was an injury which must have bled freely at first, and evidences of the fact were on his coat, but his face had been freshly washed.

On the whole, he was a most dilapidated looking man, and his brothers stared at him in silent wonder.

Without a word he put his rifle away, slouched to the table and began eating ravenously, but their quick eyes had detected the fact that he was not only bruised but weak. His face, however, bore an expression of dogged resolution.

"What ther blazes is ther matter, Dave?" demanded Bill, finally finding his voice.

"Nothin'," was the surly reply.

"Nothin'! It looks like it. You look ez though you'd been run over by a railroad train. Hev ye fit a j. guar, or met some o' ther men o' Hotspur?"

"That's my business, an' I reckon I kin attend ter it without any o' your help," growled the youngest brother.

"Don't git yer back up, Dave. I meant no harm, an' yer know ther Buzzard brothers back each other fur all they're wuth. Ef ye hev met inemies, they're ourn, too. Ef you've fell off'm a precipice, that's a cat o' diff'rent color. Which is it?"

"I say it's none o' your business. What's ther matter with you? Ef I don't look ter suit ye, look t'other way. I reckon it hain't a fashion-block you're gazin' on. Look t'other way. Thar ain't nothin' ther matter with me, an' I kin lick ther man that says thar is. Ef you don't understand me now, take a pair o' revolvers, an' we'll go outside an' settle it!"

Dave glared at his questioner like a wounded tiger, and Bill knew that further words were useless.

"Hev yer own way," he answered, tersely.

Not another word was spoken during the meal. Dave ate ravenously, but his brothers, who watched him closely, saw that the color did not return to his face, and they knew he was a good deal worse injured than he would admit. At the same time, they had no more to say. When one of the Buzzards announced that he wished to be let alone his wishes were usually respected, for he stood ready to enforce them with a knife and revolver.

When Dave had finished eating he arose, still showing his mysterious weakness.

"I'm goin' ter bed," he observed, "an' I want ye ter keep away from me."

"All right," said Bill.

He knew that, if the truth was ever known, they must wait their younger brother's pleasure, and all tried to seem unconscious of the cloud; but when he had closed the door of the inner room behind him, they went outside and spent considerable time in wondering what had occurred.

It was generally agreed that he had met some of the men of Hotspur—they set the number at about five—and had been terribly whipped, but they could not understand why he should refuse to tell them about it and ask for their aid to gain revenge.

At the same time Dave was in his room. He had not retired, but he had removed his shirt and was dressing a wound in his side. It was not a serious one; the bruise on his head was more painful and dangerous; but he ground his teeth as he washed and bandaged it.

"I'll have his life for it, ther sneaking calf! He took me unawares, an' he's a coward at heart. Death and destruction! I'm burnin' up with fever. An' I was humbled before her. Why do I think o' her? She's a woman, an' it's weakness ter think o' sech, but her baby face dances afore me all ther while. Zetta! It's a purty name, an' ef I had her I wouldn't keer so much 'cause Mona shook us. Ef I had her? Bah! I'm gettin' ter be a fool. I wouldn't hev Bill, an' Tom, an' Jack know how I got this hurt fur a fortune. All fur a woman! Oh! Dave Buzzard, you're a blamed, drivelin' fool!"

Again he ground his strong teeth, and could Neal Bishop have seen him then, he might well have shrunk back appalled at the storm he raised when he became Zetta's champion.

When the wound was dressed the young giant threw himself on the bed. He did not leave it that day. He fell asleep after awhile, but when his brothers cautiously opened the door a little they saw him tossing feverishly and muttering indistinct words which told that his thoughts still ran in the same channel.

Despite the indications of severe illness, the fever abated during the afternoon and, at about three o'clock, as the other brothers were cleaning their weapons in the main room, the inner door opened and he came out.

He was pale and weak, and at once walked to a chair and sat down.

"Be you goin' ter Hotspur?" he asked.

"Yas," replied Bill, slowly. "Sech war our intention."

"I ain't fit ter go with ye; I've got ter git back some o' my strength afore I take ther war-path. I want'er say a word about Mona. Be you goin' ter steal her?"

"Ef we kin."

"That's all right, an' I approve on't, ez I said afore, but I want ye all ter solemnly swar not ter harm so much ez a ha'r o' her head."

"It would spile our revenge on Rube ef we did. No, we won't harm her; we swar it."

"That's enough," Dave answered, after a long look at each of the others in succession. "I wish I war able ter go with ye, but I ain't an' that's the eend on't. I wish ye good-luck."

He fell into thought so deep that when the others addressed him he did not hear. He was thinking of Zetta. Her face still "danced before him," in imagination, and though she was an indirect, and innocent, cause of an affair which came near costing him his life, he had taken a deep fancy to her. He even went so far as to wonder how life would go with him if he was to take her, go far away and desert the Buzzards forever, but as the day-dream dissipated a little he started up angrily.

Zetta was a woman; it was "weakness" to think of her!

Bill, Jack and Tom left the Roost two hours before dark. They were impatient to make their stroke for revenge, and as that was the third of the days of grace granted Hotspur City, they felt sure Colorado Rube would be so on the alert during the night that Mrs. Ralston could not be abducted.

But, they argued, no one would suspect that they would attack during the day; consequently, that was the time to act.

They left the Roost and descended Sugar-Loaf, thence moving on toward the village.

Hotspur was living its usual quiet existence. Men and women were occupied with their daily duties, and the place was much like an Eastern village.

Yet, there were anxious people there, as there were everywhere. Broderick had paid a second visit to the chasm down which Nelson had gone. He found it too deep and precipitous to be descended, and otherwise inaccessible, and there did not seem any danger that the colonel had escaped death, but he would have felt much safer could he have seen his lifeless body.

Zetta, too, was in trouble. After she fled from the scene of the fight between Dave Buzzard and Neal Bishop, she had seen neither of them. What had become of the latter she did not know; she had expected him to return to Hotspur, but he did not come.

That Dave was dead she did not doubt, and as she knew he had been Mrs. Ralston's favorite brother, she was filled with consternation. True, there was an open rupture in their relations, and Dave was bitter toward his sister, but he was still her brother. Zetta felt that she ought to tell what had happened, but she feared Mona would blame her and shrunk from the confession.

The Buzzards approached the village secretly. Unless some of the people were wandering out of their usual limit, there was really little fear of discovery, for the gulches furnished abundant shelter, and all seemed in their favor.

They were soon at a point directly back of Colorado Rube's house, and by some careful work they gained the shelter of the trees where Mildred Fenton once met Neal; a place only a few yards from the building.

Here they paused to reconnoiter, and at the end of ten minutes they decided that there was no one in the house besides Mona and Miss Fenton.

This decision arrived at, a few words sufficed to settle their course. They decided to move at once.

Just as they had finished laying their plans, the last obstacle to their success was removed as Mildred donned her outer garments and left the house.

Then they waited no longer and were soon inside.

Mrs. Ralston sat sewing in the front room, unconscious of the storm which was rising around her. Her first warning came when a voice sounded behind her.

"Woman!"

It was Bill Buzzard's peculiar mode of greeting, but it was enough to cause her to spring to her feet and wheel like a flash.

She recognized the voice.

Three of her brothers stood before her, and she needed no explanation to understand that they were there as her enemies. The one who had always been the kindest to her was absent, but it mattered little then. Each one of the three faces bore a scowl, and they were so disposed that escape was impossible.

The little woman was frightened, but her heroic spirit stood her in good use, and she did not faint or scream. Instead, she resolved to try diplomacy upon them.

"Is it you, boys?" she began, steadily, even smilingly, but Bill interrupted:

"Yas, it's us; but ye needn't put on no artificial grins: we're hyar as your enemies. Ther day o' reck'nin' hez come!"

CHAPTER XIX.

COLORADO RUBE TAKES THE WAR-PATH.

BILL BUZZARD'S voice sounded harshly and relentlessly, but he was dealing with one of the same stock as himself.

"I decline to consider you my enemies," Mrs. Ralston coolly answered. "You are my brothers, and whatever you do I am going to be your friend."

"Keep yer friendship fur them as wants it!" Bill retorted—"we don't. When ye deserted us fur that sneakin' Rube Ralston, whom we all hated, ther bonds was cut loose. We told ye then how 'twould be, and you're only reapin' ez you hev sowed. You've had fa'r warnin', an' now we've come in our might. You are goin' with us."

"Indeed, I shall not!" cried Mona.

"Ye can jest bet your last red ye will!" the desperado asserted.

"An' without any more delay," said Jack, glancing out of the window.

"Hurry up!" added Tom.

Bill made a leap of surprising agility and caught his sister in his arms, clasping one hand over her mouth before she could cry for help. His hold was not cruel, but it was strong and relentless. The other brothers came forward, too, and in a brief space of time Mrs. Ralston's hands were tied behind her back and a handkerchief passed over her mouth in place of Bill's hand.

She had struggled at first, but as she saw the folly of it, she ceased and stood passive in their hands. She deeply regretted that the power to talk was no longer hers, but her brave spirit remained undaunted and she resolved to make the best of her trouble.

She did not believe them evil enough to actually injure her, and she knew her husband would not desert her.

They lost no unnecessary time, but proceeded to retreat from the house. They had barely passed the threshold, using the rear door, when they stood face to face with a man who stopped in utter bewilderment.

It was Makepeace Mullin.

Jack leaped forward, seized him by the arm, and pressed a revolver against his temple.

"Speak one word an' you're a dead man!" he cried.

"I'm deaf an' dumb!" promptly answered Mullin. "Ez Socrates used fer ter observe: 'I'm ez mute ez an oyster.'"

"See that you keep so. I reckon ye know us?"

"I reckon I do, Jack."

"You're jest ther man we wanted ter see. We want ter leave a word fur Rube Ralston. Tell him we hev his wife, an' that he won't see her ag'in while wood grows an' water runs. Say that it's our turn ter crow now, an' that this is ther first step ter make Hotspur howl. We're goin' ter make ther town a graveyard, an' don't ye forgit it!"

"Yes, an' tell him ef he wants his wife ter apply ter Bill Buzzard," added that person.

"I'll deliver ther hull mail 'cordin' ter orders, but, see hyar, now—what d'ye think 'll happen when he knows—"

Mr. Mullin stopped speaking suddenly. Bill had made a secret motion to Tom, and that man brought his clubbed revolver down on the luckless janitor's head with a force which dashed him senseless to the ground.

Mona's eyes flashed, but she was helpless.

"That'll do fur him; he ain't hurt bad, an' will soon come ter life," said Bill. "Now, boyees, out o' this on ther jump!"

And the retreat was begun.

"Gone!"

It was Colorado Rube who uttered the word, standing before Makepeace Mullin with a white face and a battle light in his eyes.

He had come home to find his home vacant and Mullin lying insensible near the back-door, but an application of restoratives had soon brought the latter around, and he had told the story of Mrs. Ralston's abduction so far as the particulars were known to him.

The Strong Arm of Hotspur turned away, went to the wall and took down a pair of magnificent revolvers. The one he usually carried was a plain, 32 caliber, weapon, but the others were silver-mounted, 41-caliber, and as fine specimens of their kind as could be found in Colorado.

Rube's set face awed Mullin, but he had a question to ask.

"What be you goin' ter do?" he asked.

"Rescue Mona!" was the terse reply.

"I'll go with ye."

"No, you will not."

"Why not?"

"Because I go alone."

"Thar are four o' ther Buzzards."

"I don't care if there are a hundred. I shall fight for my wife, and no human power can defy me. The men of Hotspur City believe they know me, since the night when I fought Bill Buzzard, but that was child's play. I am going on the war-path now, and I shall be as merciless as were those brutes. If need be, I will leave a dead man at every rod of the way between here and Buzzard's Roost!"

Uttered by him the words did not sound like empty boasting, and Mullin was more than ever awed. He was no coward, and would gladly have accompanied his friend, but he felt that it would be useless to ask permission.

He therefore stood in silence while Rube carefully loaded the weapons. Twilight was falling outside, and this so added to the picture that, as Makepeace afterward said, he felt as though he was attending a funeral.

When all was ready, Ralston again turned to his companion.

"You can tell people where I have gone," he said, "but you need not expect me back until you see me."

And then he went out and, in the gathering darkness, turned his face toward Sugar-Loaf and strode away.

Outwardly, he had never been calmer, but, really, a fire raged within him which was like a volcano's heat. He had not expected the blow. Every night since the trouble began he had been on the alert, and vigilantly he had watched over his home, but that the Buzzards would dare to make the attempt in broad daylight, much less that they could succeed, had seemed impossible.

It was not his negligence, but their rash courage, which had accomplished the work.

However, that mattered little; Mona had been taken away, and he was going to Buzzard's Roost to rescue her. The fact that he would encounter vast odds weighed nothing in his mind—a mind which had never known fear.

Steadily and swiftly he climbed Sugar-Loaf. By the time he reached the top it was fully dark, but all the way he had been guided by a light which shone from the house on the peak's ragged top.

As he neared the house he paused for a moment to reconnoiter. There was no sign of an ambush, and he strode forward, laid his hand on the door and flung it wide open.

A moment more and he had crossed the threshold.

There he halted, a cocked and leveled revolver in each hand, his face calm, but his keen eyes on the alert and taking in the whole interior of the room at one swift glance.

Only one man was visible—Dave Buzzard.

He had been sitting at the table with his head resting on his hands, but he sat erect when Rube so unceremoniously entered. He did not look less demoralized than during the day, and, for a wonder, he did not make a hostile movement at sight of the Strong Arm of Hotspur.

He suspected at once why he had come.

"Dog!" said Ralston, in a voice which was not above his usual tone, but which had an incisive, hissing key which made it terribly distinct, "where is Mona?"

Dave's dull eyes lighted up. His brothers had accomplished their object, though he had not seen them, and he was elated.

"You orter know better than I. I am not her keeper."

"Liar! You have stolen her."

"I ain't left the house sence mornin'," the young giant replied, too much pleased at thought of Rube's suffering to resent his words, and utterly indifferent to the leveled revolvers.

Ralston suddenly remembered that Mullin had said he saw nothing of Dave, and as he saw how ill and wretched the man looked he was prepared to believe the last statement.

"It's all the same; your brothers have stolen her, and she is now in this house."

"You're at liberty ter look all ye please. Ef you find her, let me know," said Dave, with a grin.

"You can't deceive me thus. Get up and conduct me over the whole house."

"I said ye war at liberty ter s'arch, but ez fur showin' ye about, I'm cussed ef I do it. My strength ain't over an' above good, an' I'm not goin' ter turn yer sarvint."

"Remember I have you at the revolver's muzzle."

"I don't keer a durn ef ye hev me at ther cannon's mouth. I hev said I won't go, an' I'll see ye in perdition afore I will go. Don't ye think ye kin scare me one identicle bit, fur it ain't in ye!"

It was sturdy courage, rather than bravado, and Rube promptly abandoned his position.

"So be it," he answered. "I know the way and I'll go alone, but I warn you and any other man who may be within sound of my voice that treachery will cost you dearly. Be warned in time."

"Tie up yer chin an' give yer tongue a rest!" growled Dave.

"You'll get tied up for the hangman one of these days, if you don't go slow!" Colorado Rube retorted.

He then took the light in one hand and, still watching Dave warily, went to an inner room.

The young giant was left alone, but though he still kept his seat his air was less phlegmatic than before.

"What's in ther wind now?" he muttered. "Ther boyees hev stole Mona, but they ain't brought her here. Why not? I expected they would, an' they never lisp'd that they wouldn't. Kin thar hev been treachery? P'raps they've

lied ter me an' killed her! By ther gods o' war, ef they hev I'll tar them limb from limb!"

He clinched his hands, and his face was like that of an angry tiger.

"Cuss this bodily weakness which keeps me hyar. Why can't I be up an' doin' when I'm needed so much?"

It did not take Ralston long to search the house, but he searched in vain. He returned to the kitchen, set the lamp on the table and faced Dave with a determined air.

"Mona is not here; you have concealed her elsewhere," he said. "Tell me where she is, or I'll put a bullet through you!"

And he presented his revolver to Dave's head.

CHAPTER XX.

"WHERE IS MONA?"

It was a threat which evidently meant all that it implied, but Dave Buzzard did not waver in the least.

"You kin blaze away ef you think proper," he answered, "but it won't do ye any good. I don't know where Mona is. Bill, Jack an' Tom left hyar this arternoon ter steal her, an' I s'posed they was goin' ter bring her here, but I ain't see'd them. Whar they have gone I don't know."

"I believe you lie!" declared Colorado Rube.

"I don't keer a durn what you believe."

"You can't make me believe you are not in their confidence. I know the way of the Buzzard brothers; they hang together through thick and thin."

"They hev did so, an' they'd better continue so," said Dave, with a look Rube did not fail to read.

"Have you quarreled with them?"

"Thar has been some diff'rence o' opinion, but I can't b'lieve they'd deceive—ef they have, it'll be death fur somebody."

"What was the difference of opinion?" Rube more moderately asked.

"That's my business, not yourn."

"Once, and for all, will you swear you don't know where Mona is?"

For a moment Dave hesitated. He hated the man before him and was anxious to see him suffer; that was why he did not try to use a revolver upon him; but it looked just then as though his elder brothers had played a trick, and if that was so he did not care how soon Rube was on their track.

"I swar," he finally answered. "Mona ain't been hyar, an' I ain't seen ther boyees sence they left hyar four or five hours ago."

Colorado Rube believed him at last, and he resolved to leave the Roost at once. It seemed probable that the abductors had taken their captive to some other hiding-place, but there was a possibility that, by hovering along the trail, he might find the party, or happen upon a single one of the brothers sent as a messenger to Dave.

Knowing the latter had once had a kind of affection for Mona, he endeavored to appeal to his better nature, but it was a complete failure. Dave bluntly expressed undying hatred both for his sister and the man she had married.

There was no more to be said, and Ralston left the house and went outside. He paused for a moment and looked around. From Sugar-Loaf's top the lights of the mining camps of Hotspur City, Deerfield and Pine-Apple could be seen glimmering like so many clusters of stars, but he knew not in which direction to search for his wife. Sugar-Loaf and Bull's Head furnished many places to which she could be taken, but he believed the world was not large enough to shelter the Buzzards from his vengeance.

The news of the disappearance of Mrs. Ralston fell like a thunderbolt upon the people of Hotspur. Others had come and gone and occasioned little comment; it was a peculiarity of the West; but the little woman had won her way straight to the hearts of her neighbors, and a warlike spirit sprung up when they knew her villainous relatives had abducted her.

Zetta Willis was in despair. Mona had been like a sister to her, and the blow fell heavily.

It was not until some time after the news reached her that the girl thought of Mildred Fenton. Then she put on her hat and went over to see that young woman.

Mildred seemed to be alone in Ralston's house, but the visitor had no means of knowing that she had interrupted an interview between the two plotters, Mildred and Broderick, in which they were trying to decide how the new state of affairs would affect their own schemes.

Broderick had taken refuge in an inner room, and Miss Fenton put on a look of great sorrow, and received Zetta as a caller should be received in a time of universal sorrow.

She played her part well. She had the natural gifts of an actress, and her prolonged career as a schemer under Broderick's tuition had served to make her all that was needed. It was a melancholy interview. Zetta was sincerely affected, and Mildred met sigh with sigh, tear with tear and regret with regret; while her partner in evil secretly watched them, and rubbed his hands with satisfaction.

To him the scene was one of the most comical he had seen for a long time.

When Zetta left the house she started to return at once to Mayor Mumford's; but she had gone but half the distance when she was accosted by a man she did not at first recognize. He, however, raised his hat politely and addressed her. It was Neal Bishop.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Willis, but I have something to say which I think will be of interest."

By that time his identity was no longer in doubt.

"You are the gentleman who saved me from—from the man who assaulted me in the mountain," she said, quickly. "I have wished to see and thank you, and to apologize for having so unceremoniously fled, then; but I was too much frightened to reason clearly."

"You certainly did what was for the best; I have always approved of your course. We won't speak of that now. I have something else to say, however, and I must ask you to respect the confidence and not betray the source of your information. Where is Rube Ralston?"

"Gone in search of his wife, who has been abducted—"

"Yes, I know. Well, try to see him the moment he returns and say, from me, that she has been taken to Bull's Head."

"Is it so?"

"Yes. I saw them by accident—Mrs. Ralston, whom I plainly recognized, and three stout ruffians whom subsequent developments prove me to have correctly judged to be her brothers. Just where they have taken her I do not know, for I did not follow—I deeply regret it now—but when I saw them they were just entering the wide canyon which leads like a tunnel into the south side of the peak."

"Cannon Canyon," said Zetta.

"I believe they do call it that. I ought to have followed, but I did not get my wits about me soon enough. I trust, however, that with this information, Ralston will be able to track them down. I desire, however, that my name shall not appear in this case, nor any mention of me which shall lead people to suspect I had a part in it."

"Why not?" Zetta asked, in surprise.

"I don't want any one to know I am near here."

There was a brief pause he did not fail to interpret.

"Believe me," he said, earnestly, "I am not a criminal hiding from justice. Do not think that, Miss Willis, I beg of you."

"I will not," she answered. "You were brave in defending me, and I feel sure you are an honorable man."

Bishop winced a little. He had never been proud of his battle with Dave Buzzard, but it was all right if she thought so.

"Thank you," he said. "I am glad to have your good opinion, and as I have no dishonorable motive in hiding, I hope you will continue it—until I am able to speak more plainly. Just now I am hiding, but it is for another than myself; I hope to help some one who needs help."

Neal spoke with an earnestness which indicated that he was very anxious for Zetta's good opinion, but after a brief pause, added in a different key, though, with equal earnestness:

"Above all, do not tell any one you have seen me. Say to Mr. Ralston that a man who is his friend has seen the Buzzards taking his wife to Bull's Head, but, I beseech you, give no particulars. To others, say nothing. Will you kindly promise?"

Zetta was favorably impressed, and was kind enough to believe Bishop did, indeed, have a good motive for what he asked; so she readily promised.

"I saw you a moment ago with a lady in Ralston's house," Neal hesitatingly continued. "Is she a friend of yours?"

"No; at least, I have known her but a few days."

"I advise you not to like her and not to trust her. I do not like her appearance. Of course you will not tell her you have seen me?"

"Certainly not. I shall tell no one except Mr. Ralston, and to him I shall give no description of you."

"Thank you, Miss Willis; you are very kind. I will now bid you good-by, but I trust you will some day see me when there is no need of secrecy."

He made a more elaborate adieu, lifted his hat, turned, and hastened away in the darkness.

Zetta looked after him thoughtfully. His gentlemanly manner had made an impression on her mind, and she not only felt that he was an honorable man, but the mystery with which he surrounded himself appealed to her youthful spirit of romance. Mature meditation, however, gave her an idea creditable to her perspicacity, and she suspected there was more in his mention of Mildred Penton than was visible on the surface.

He was anxious that she should not know he was near Hotspur. Was it solely because he had seen the two girls together, or was he personally acquainted with the young woman?

"I don't like her," thought Zetta, "and

it may be he knows something not to her credit."

Thinking thus, she resumed her way toward her home.

The night was drawing to a close when Colorado Rube returned.

Zetta had not retired, and as theirs was the first light he saw on entering the village, he called at the house. The mayor had retired, but Rube was soon in possession of the news Zetta had to tell. In order to communicate it, she had to wrap herself in a mantle of mystery equal to Bishop's. She said she had received the information from an acquaintance whose name she could not tell, but who, she felt sure, had spoken the truth.

Ralston was at first inclined to be dissatisfied with this incomplete account, but he respected Zetta's wishes and passed it by. The statement that his wife had been taken to Bull's Head impressed him as being very probable, and he decided to make a start for Cannon Canyon at an early hour.

He did not sleep that night.

An hour before daylight he left the village and started for Bull's Head. He intended to go alone, but another form loomed up in the darkness, and Makepeace Mullin came to his side.

"I'm goin' with ye," said the latter. "Don't say no, fur I'm a mighty obstinate man when I set out, an' you'll find I'm no chicken on ther trail."

"Do you know the character of the men we go to seek?"

"Ther Buzzards? Wal, a few. No man kin give me pints on them. They're bad from ther ground up, ez Socrates used fer ter observe, but I don't come o' a kind that skeers."

"It will be a fight to the death."

"Count me in then," said Makepeace, cheerfully. "I'm a bu'stin' thunderbolt from Lightning Valley, ther last half o' a compressed cyclone an' all creation on ther massacre. Let me at ther foe; they've had things ther own way too long, an' now, ez Socrates would put it, we're goin' ter hev ther earth."

"A grave, possibly."

"Not for me; I'm not in a passive mood, in ther present tense."

"I'm afraid you are reckless."

"I ain't never brash when there's danger, but I ain't afeerd ter raise my head like a lily o' ther valley when there's need on't."

Colorado Rube opposed him no further. Mullin was anxious to go, and he certainly ought to comprehend the danger if he didn't, so, knowing him to be as brave as the average man, the Strong Arm was rather pleased to have his company.

Fully armed, both men left the village and started for the wild country at and around Bull's Head.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CRUSADE OF BULL'S HEAD.

THE break of day found Ralston and Mullin at the mouth of Cannon Canyon. It was a wide, deep cleft in the mountain, which some one had seen fit to name as before stated, and one where Colorado Rube felt sure a good deal of trouble would overtake them.

Bull's Head was little known to any one. Some prospecting had been done there, but the yield of yellow dust was so small that it was soon discontinued, and the peak had no other attractions. Wild, rocky, even dangerous to the traveler, few people had ever cared to explore it.

Lying nearly east of Sugar Loaf, the two peaks had one feature in common. The southeast side of Sugar Loaf, and the southwest of Bull's Head, each ended in a sheer precipice hundreds of feet high, looking not unlike the bottom of an upturned flat-iron. It was to the east of this precipice that Cannon Canyon cut Bull's Head.

Many men would have despaired of finding any one in this place, but Rube Ralston never abandoned what he undertook, and he strode into the mouth of the canyon with his faithful friend at his side.

The Strong Arm was thoroughly on the alert. He did not believe the Buzzards would hide like rats in their holes; they feared no man, and were likely to be on the offensive, and in that case there was liable to be an ambush awaiting him.

"It's a mean advantage ter take o' a man ter hide in this ongrateful country," said Makepeace, who detested silence. "I wouldn't use my worst enemy so."

"Wait until you sink low enough to steal women, and you will do anything," Rube tersely answered.

"I shall commit suicide fu'st o' all."

"Possibly."

"I've got a sore spot on my head whar that Buzzard hit me," continued Mullin, resolved not to be silenced; "an' I'm goin' ter pay him off. He smote me on one cheek, an' now I'll give it ter him on both. He'll think Bull's Head has fell enter him."

Rube did not answer, and Mullin drew a deep sigh. He felt that he was being misused. To go out on the war-path without a word by

the way was not his style of doing business. However, he did not neglect ordinary precautions because of that; he had announced that he would "back up" his friend, and he intended to do it if his body and mind did not dissolve copartnership.

For a quarter of a mile Cannon Canyon was wide and level, a noble pass; but the way gradually became more broken and rocky. From that point it was all a haphazard game, with the chances against the searchers. At first they had seen tracks in the canyon, but on reaching the border soil no sign was visible.

Mullin began to feel the evident hopelessness of their quest, but if Colorado Rube had any misgivings, his strong face did not express them. He was always on the alert, and his air of resolution now and then brightened his companion's flagging spirits.

As they went on the canyon gradually grew indistinct; the bed became higher, and it gradually merged into the wild scenery which surrounded it. And it was wild, with rock piled upon rock, and canyons and gulches crossing each other in every conceivable fashion.

Another half-hour passed. They were crossing a rocky ridge, when Rube suddenly paused and his manner became more alert. Mullin looked around, but failed to perceive anything.

"What is it?" he cautiously asked.

"Try your nostrils and see if you smell smoke."

Makepeace obeyed, and then shook his head.

"I don't," he answered.

"Well, I do."

Ralston waited, with his hand on his ready revolver, and directed his gaze to the four points of the compass, but he saw no sign of life.

"We are near some one," he continued, cautiously. "I can smell tobacco smoke."

Mullin inhaled a prolonged breath through his nose.

"I can't get a sniff," he said, dubiously.

Rube turned his gaze on the ground near them, and ended by quietly lying down. At the end of two minutes he arose.

"Don't speak above a whisper," he cautioned.

"Tobacco smoke is ascending through an opening in this pile of stones, and it follows some one must be smoking a pipe down below, but how are we to know who he is? There is no entrance near here."

"Wal, I reckon he must have gone in somehow," was Mullin's brilliant decision.

"If he did, we can go the same way. Follow me!"

They retraced their steps and began looking for a cave. There were plenty of clefts in the rocks, but one after another failed to lead them to anything more. Anon, however, there was a change in the situation.

On the edge of one of the clefts, which was like a hallway, the keen eyes of Colorado Rube detected a fragment of woolen goods. He picked it off, examined it carefully and then turned to Mullin. His eyes had a gleam which told that he was thoroughly aroused.

"It is a fragment from my wife's dress," he said, "and we have at last found the entrance to the cave where they have concealed her. Luck has befriended us strangely. We have now only to enter and rescue her."

Only to enter and rescue her! He mentioned it as though it was the easiest thing in the world, but Makepeace felt a sensation along his head as though each individual hair was trying to stand erect and walk out of his hat and out of danger.

He would not show the white feather, however.

"Lead on. Ez Socrates used fer ter observe, 'We'll fight it out on this line ef it takes all summer.'"

The Strong Arm directed a keen glance in advance. All was utter darkness a few feet away. He knew what lay before them was hedged in with danger. Surely, no one would fail to take some precautions, and though the Buzzards smoked, it was not likely they slumbered. The two ideas did not harmonize.

Rube extended himself at full length and began to crawl along like a snake. Mullin had imitated him in the first part, but he tried in vain to make the second a success. How the leader got over the ground he could not comprehend. Still, he did fairly.

Ralston went forward steadily. He was soon in utter darkness. Each movement had to be felt out and carefully executed. He expected every moment to hear a shot, but profound silence reigned all around except for their own movements.

They went further, and then Rube suddenly halted. He had heard a well-known sound—the striking of a match. Then a little flame leaped up just ahead. It was raised, and a human face was partially lighted as the man who had struck it lit his pipe afresh.

Rube recognized Jack Buzzard.

After the lighting was completed, all signs died out except the dull glow from the pipe.

The Strong Arm paused to deliberate. He had found one of the abductors, and he did not doubt but the others, and their captive, were near at hand. But how was he to get at them?

His resolution was soon made, and he only

paused to touch Mullin's arm significantly and then pressed forward. His gaze was always fixed on the dull glow, and he wormed forward with admirable skill. Makepeace more slowly followed. He was ready to aid with knife and revolver, but he felt that he was not equal to the demands of the crawling game.

Colorado Rube worked forward as far as he thought advisable and then slowly arose to his feet. Cautiously as he moved Jack heard the rustle, and he turned his head quickly.

Secrecy was no longer possible.

Ralston bounded forward like a flash, and in a moment more his strong hands were fixed upon Jack. The assault drove the latter back; he tripped over a rock and both fell a distance of four feet, Buzzard striking on top.

It was a severe shock for Rube, but he retained his presence of mind and his strength, and he wrapped the giant in the same hold to which Bill Buzzard had already succumbed.

Mullin bounded to the rescue, and just then two shouts echoed through the cave. One came from Jack; the second sounded from a point further back.

Looking in that direction, Mullin saw Tom Buzzard rushing forward with a torch in his hand. The undismayed janitor cocked his revolver, but at that moment another weapon spoke from the interior of the cave, and Tom dropped the torch and fell headlong to the floor.

The Strong Arm heard the sounds but, not knowing their cause, supposed that Makepeace was already battling with Tom and Bill. Then all of his splendid powers were shown. He whirled Jack over as though his weight had been one, not two, hundred pounds, and kneeling upon his chest compressed his throat with one hand while he drew a revolver with the other. Even then he would not take the giant's life.

There was a sound of footsteps from the interior of the cave and two persons appeared. One, who bore a torch in each hand, was easily recognized as Mrs. Ralston, but in front of her strode a man who was neither Bill, nor any other of the giant brothers. Mullin put up his revolver doubtfully, but the stranger spoke in a deep, base voice:

"All quiet on the right, friends of Colorado Rube. Here comes his wife, and I'm a tame grizzly with my claws cut close. The Buzzard gang is down, and here am I to umpire the last round in the game."

He caught a torch from Mrs. Ralston's hand and came forward. He was rather a good-looking man, with a long blonde mustache which almost touched his shoulders, hair of the same color and a jolly, happy-go-lucky face.

"Rube Ralston, you tiger," he continued, "I see you have one of the amiable gang under your heel. Well, another lies dead over there with my bullet through him, and that's all there are in the cave."

The Strong Arm glanced to where his wife was on her knees beside Tom Buzzard, and then turned to Makepeace.

"Bind this man!" he said, tersely.

Jack Buzzard's face was a panorama of furious emotions, but he was helpless, and Mullin soon applied cords which secured him for the time.

Then Rube walked forward. Mona was still on her knees, and weeping softly, for there lay Tom Buzzard, dead forever to the world.

CHAPTER XXII.

APOLLO ABE.

FOR a while there was silence in the cave except for Mrs. Ralston's half-indistinct weeping. The man who lay dead beside her had been evil-hearted and he had turned against her without good cause, but, in spite of all, he had been her brother, and the tears which fell on his face were those of genuine sorrow.

Colorado Rube moved forward and lifted her, and the touch of his protecting arms had never been more welcome than then. He felt that words would be out of place, and he spoke none, but she understood him just as well.

The stranger who had sped the fatal shot looked from one to the other and his careless face bore a rueful expression. He turned slowly to Mullin.

"I reckon I've put my foot in it, up to the knee, but I meant all for the best. He was rushing for your outfit like a mad bull, and I chipped in cheerfully. If I fired out of time, I'm almighty sorry I pulled trigger."

"You've done the world a favor," answered Makepeace, in a subdued voice, "an' thar won't be no great pile o' weepin', but he was her brother an' it hits sorter hard at fu'st."

The stranger pulled his long mustache nervously, and looked as though he wished the dead man again alive, but Tom had laid his last plot, and gone on his last raid, and the Buzzard brothers now numbered but three. The wages of sin had overtaken him, and Hotspur City was not yet a graveyard.

Anon, Ralston took the stranger aside.

"I do not understand how you came here," he said.

"Neither do I, pard. I never try to understand what I do, or where I go. I'm a leaf in a

gale, and I go where the wind blows. I dare say I'm a stranger to you, but there are those who know me well. I'm Apollo Abe, by name, and I'm a full-grown blizzard, twenty-one years of age, entitled to vote, drink or fight, wear suspenders and part my hair in the middle. As for this drama here, I was quietly sleeping in the cave when the three big brothers came in with their captive. I caught onto the situation from their talk, but, having no desire to harness a wild-cat team, I kept out of sight until you began the inning. Then I came in to bat and dropped one of the base-men. I see I put my foot in it, up to the knee, and I'm sorry, but I thought I was doing my duty."

His frank manner favorably impressed Rube. "Do not blame yourself. There are circumstances which make the affair a painful one, but the world is better off without Tom Buzzard."

"I'm glad you feel that way, for I only did it for your good."

"I feel sure you did, and I thank you cordially. I was in the fight in dead earnest, but I didn't covet the earth. Do you go with us to Hotspur?"

"I suppose I may as well. I am naturally a society man, and if you'll put me through my paces there, I'll esteem it a favor. Yes; I'll go, and if I can be of any use to you, don't hesitate to let me know. I'm a cheerful man anywhere you put me, and if there's any fighting to be done, use me as a breastwork and you'll see I won't turn a hair."

Rube did not answer. He was trying to form a plan for disposing of Jack Buzzard. He might have been taken to Hotspur as a prisoner, but Rube did not wish it so.

He finally formed a plan, and, securing all the weapons he could find, released Jack.

"I am going to leave you here to care for your brother," he said. "I am told that Bill has gone to the Roost; I advise you to await his return. I am sincerely sorry that Tom has met such a violent end, but he took his life and pinned it to his sleeve; you must not be surprised that he lost it. I sincerely hope it will prove a lesson to you, and I beseech you to abandon your vendetta against me. There is no earthly cause for it. I have already used you well, and I have repeatedly refrained from raising my hand against you. To day you lay helpless under my knee and Tom was rushing upon me, but I would not strike you. Remember this, Jack, and let us no longer be foes. I wish you well."

"You've done, be you?" returned Jack, hoarsely. "I thought you'd run down arter a while. Now, you hear me. I'm Jack Buzzard, an' ther blood in my veins is red. Thar's nothin' weak or puny there. From this hour I know but one motive—to kill you! Ef I had my choice ter leave ye forever an' live a hundred year, or ter kill ye now an' die beside ye, you'd be a dead man afore five seconds. Thar, Rube Ralston, lays my brother—dead—murdered! Your life shall pay for his!"

"John!"

It was Mona's soft voice at his elbow.

He turned slowly.

"Wal?"

"For my sake—"

"That'll do. I want no more whinin' nor foolisnin'. You are no sister o' mine, an' when I strike ag'in, it means death ter you. Tom is dead, but Bill an' Dave an' me still live, an' we live fur vengeance!"

"Great Heavens! John, will you forget our childhood—"

"I will—I have! I remember only one thing now—I live fur vengeance!"

The giant folded his arms, and his coarse face moved in a smile which was enough to chill the heart of a timid person. Even Apollo Abe shivered a little and regretted he had not fired twice and stretched Jack Buzzard beside his brother.

Colorado Rube would not linger to hear such language. He was not accustomed to bear men's malice and insults as he had borne them from the Buzzards, and the control he had so long exerted over his hot temper seemed deserting him now. With the giant standing there, and threatening death to his wife, he felt like showing him the heavy hand which had made men tremble in the old days before he came to Hotspur.

"Come!" he said, simply; and they went out of the cave, leaving Jack still standing with folded arms, looking after them with an expression they never forgot.

Then he was left alone with the dead.

Hotspur City was safely reached. Mullin conducted Apollo Abe to the Old Rye Hotel, and when Rube had seen his wife safely home, he went at once to Mumford's. He had a suggestion to make to the mayor.

He found that official looking as though he had just arisen from a sick-bed, but mentally explained it by supposing it was due to the abduction of Mona and the consequent uncertainty.

Mumford rallied feebly, and asked concerning the result of the search, which the Strong Arm tersely gave.

"It's a pity you didn't kill the whole of them," groaned the unhappy mayor.

"I believe you, and I am convinced that the time for inactivity is past. The death of Tom Buzzard precipitates the inevitable. If the giant brothers hated us before, what will it be now? When Bill hears of the tragedy he will be like a wounded tiger; and a reign of bloodshed will follow which will be appalling. Mayor Mumford, we cannot allow this."

"Great heavens, how can we prevent it?"

"By action. Is a town to be terrorized by three men? No, not while I have a controlling voice."

"What can we do?"

"Do?"

"Yes. Shall we send for United States troops?"

Ralston laughed shortly.

"Pardon me, mayor, but your question is absurd. Send for troops when our enemies number but three? Never! Our way is to march at once against Buzzard's Roost, seize the brothers, escort them beyond our limits and warn them never to return under penalty of death."

"Our men will not follow on such a mission."

"Then they are cowards!" retorted Rube.

"Call it so if you will, but there are no other men like the Buzzard brothers. I verily believe four men equal to them were never before banded together."

"I hope not."

"Well, Ralston, if you are anxious to take charge, there is nothing to prevent it," said Mumford, nervously. "I am going to resign."

"Resign!" echoed Rube.

"Yes."

"What in the world do you mean?"

The mayor arose, went to the bureau, opened a drawer, took out a piece of paper and brought it to his secretary. The first thing the latter saw was the old piratical sign of the death's-head and cross-bones, and just below the characters were these words:

"CYRUS MUMFORD,

Mayor of Hotspur City:—

"The first blow has been struck, an' in a weak Hotspur shall be a graveyard. We hev sworn it, an' we never fale in what we begin. You shall be ther fu'st man ter die. Your funeral will taik place next Friday—ther day murderers are alwais hung. Prepare & Beware!"

"THER BUZZARD BROTHERS."

Colorado Rube did not need to ask if this sanguinary document was genuine. He recognized at first glance the same handwriting he had seen on the placard nailed to the door of Independence Hall, and he comprehended why the mayor talked of resigning.

"Where did this come from?" he asked.

"We found it nailed to the front door this morning."

Rube understood why Bill Buzzard had not been at the cave. He had returned to Hotspur and nailed up his warning, after which it was probable he went to the Roost.

"Well, this merely shows the necessity of our moving at once on the Buzzards."

"It shows the necessity of my resignation!" cried the mayor. "Do you think I took this office to be carved up like a Christmas turkey? No; I am going to resign."

"My dear sir—"

"It's no use to talk. It is all well enough to be mayor of an Eastern city, where the people are law-abiding; but where one has to go armed and guard his life all the while, it's a place I don't want. I have thought the matter over carefully, and always with one result; I am going to resign!"

"Will you be driven from your office?"

"Call it frightened from it; I am not particular about terms. Yes, I will be driven out, and I'm glad enough to go. You may call me a coward if you will, but I am not going to hold on and lose my life. I have been awaiting your return to tell you first, and name you as my choice for a new mayor, and now I will announce to the people that I am no longer mayor of Hotspur City!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TOUCH OF AN UNSEEN HAND.

COLORADO RUBE saw that Mumford was thoroughly in earnest, but he did not intend that he should resign until the Buzzard case was disposed of satisfactorily.

"Well, sir," he said, "since you admit it is fear of the giant brothers which influences you, I will remind you that when the matter was first mentioned it was agreed that while you held the office of mayor, I should be the Strong Arm of Hotspur City. To-day I stand ready to show you that my promise was something more than an empty boast. Give me military charge and I will stand between you and harm."

"I know you could do it if any man could; but those Buzzards would go through the side of Sugar Loaf but they would get at me. They announce in this placard that I am marked for the next victim, and they will do their best to keep their word."

"You forget that I propose to drive them from the vicinity."

Mumford did not answer, and his hand, resting on the ominous notice from the giant brothers, trembled perceptibly. As he had said, he was not the man, least of all at his present age, to lead a town through a warlike crisis.

He was afraid of the Buzzards, and not ashamed to acknowledge it.

"I don't want to urge you to anything which will result to your injury," Rube added, "but I confess I am unwilling that the Buzzards should see they have frightened us. Keep the office a few days and then, if I fail to drive them away, I will listen to talk of resignation. But you won't need to resign; the Buzzards must go. I'm going to show them they can't have the earth, and, unless they hide so that I can't find them, it's good-by to them."

"I'm not so sure of it."

"Nonsense, mayor; I am out of patience with this over-rating of the fellows. I have met Bill and Jack, the two elder brothers, in fair fight, and worsted both of them. Can three men squat on the top of Sugar-Loaf and defy us? Not while I am the Strong Arm of Hotspur City."

Colorado Rube was talking more bravely than he felt. He had grave fears that Hotspur could never get rid of the giants until they killed them, and this he was not prepared to do.

That the desperate men would make a deadly resistance was sure, but the sooner they were attacked, the better would be the prospect of getting rid of them.

He talked confidently, however, to encourage the mayor.

He succeeded in this to a certain extent, for Mumford agreed to hold to his office a few days longer, and he gave Ralston permission to form a war-party to march against the Roost.

Ralston now regretted that he had not brought Jack Buzzard in, but he had not come to a decision at the time they left the cave.

He wished to form his party and move against the enemy at once, but there was one thing which held precedence. He must have four good men to guard his house; and it was to find Mullin and make him the leader of them that he went to the Old Rye Hotel.

When he reached the saloon the janitor was not there, so he walked to the clerk's desk to inquire for him. The clerk was just looking at the register, and as Rube approached he rested his finger on one name and observed:

"A dollar out on that fellow."

"Why so?" Ralston asked.

"Oh! he's one of those fly fellows who drop in without baggage, engage a room for a week or two, eat one meal and skip. If I ever see the fellow I'll break his head."

Rube read the name.

"Col. L. C. Nelson, Virginia City, Nevada."

"What!" he exclaimed.

"He was probably colonel of a hand-organ!" said the clerk, sarcastically, and when a hotel-clerk does speak with sarcasm common men stand no chance at all.

"But, see here; when was this man here?"

The clerk pointed to the date.

"Do you say he mysteriously disappeared?"

"Rather."

"I know him; he is an old friend of mine. That is a very peculiar affair. Tell me all you know about it."

The clerk had become suddenly urbane, and he told all he could remember about the coming and disappearance of Colonel Nelson. Unfortunately, it did not occur to him that John Broderick had asked to see him and gone to his room. On his return to the hotel, the night of the tragedy, Broderick had taken the precaution to again ask for the colonel, and pretend he had not seen him, and as no one knew they had left the village together, his tracks were pretty well covered up.

Colorado Rube saw a fresh mystery thrust upon him. Colonel Nelson was a man whom he liked, and to whom he owed a debt of gratitude, and the possibility that he had met with foul play troubled him.

Mullin and Apollo Abe entered, however, and the matter was dropped for a while.

Arrangements began for the expedition against the Buzzards, but the only recruit who showed any enthusiasm was Apollo Abe. He privately announced that if he had his choice between a square fight and a square meal of victuals, with a beefsteak for the basis, he should take the fight unless it was proved to him that the steak was more tender than the average.

It was four o'clock before the war party was ready to start, but it went at last, with the Strong Arm of the city and Apollo Abe at the front.

Mullin and three other good men remained as a special guard for Mrs. Ralston and Mayor Mumford, not to mention men who were not considered heroes.

John Broderick was not among those who went away, and he was just thinking of going over to Mumford's and see if he could pose as a hero, when there was a knock at his door. He bade the applicant come in and Mildred Fenton entered.

Her ally started up with an angry frown.

"Are you mad?" he demanded. "Why did you come here? You will betray all."

"No, I shall not," she composedly answered. "I watched my chance and came in at the rear door unobserved. I shall go out the same way. Trust me to keep out of trouble."

"Well, I judge you have something to say."

"So I have. Ralston has discovered that Nelson has been here."

"Has he?" said Broderick, with interest.

"How did it come about?"

"He saw the hotel register."

"So! Well, what does he think of the case?"

"Says he fears there has been foul play. He mentioned it to me, and though I came near forgetting that Nelson was an old friend of mine, I came to time and seemed very much worried. He, however, was too much interested in his war expedition to dwell on the subject, and I don't know just what he thinks of it."

"If he don't discover that I was with Nelson, we are all right. The mountain chasm will keep its dead; have no fear of that. But, what about your work against the Ralstons?"

"Rube doesn't care a cent for me. I have done my best to fascinate him, but he is all bound up in that baby wife of his," and Miss Fenton's lips curled with a cold sneer.

"He'll be less fascinated when we make it appear that she loves some other man. I have selected the party."

"Who?"

"A new-comer, whose name is Apollo Abe. He isn't a beauty, as the name would indicate, but he's a dashing fellow; just the kind to win a woman's heart; and when we produce proof that he has won Mrs. Ralston, that fiery-tempered husband will readily believe."

"Fiery-tempered! You don't seem to know him. He is like ice—except to her."

Broderick laughed lightly.

"I know him better than you, my dear. His coolness is but a mask. He has nerves of iron; I never knew a man with such superb self-control. It used to be said of him when he carried terror all through Arizona, as Captain Redspur, that he would smile into a man's face while he cut his throat—if I may use a remark which has done service in this connection until it is gray with age and threadbare with usage."

Mildred laughed, in turn, but hers was an uneasy laugh.

"I sometimes wonder if he would not cut my throat if he knew all."

"I'll do him credit to say he would not. Captain Redspur had the reputation of being merciless, but I know of cases where he was actually chivalrous to ladies. However, it's not for me to praise Ralston; I hate him bitterly, as you know, and I'll grind his heart to atoms!"

Once more Broderick's mustache rolled back and showed his teeth in that wolfish smile which made him look like a fiend.

Mildred, however, had done her work, and she prepared to go. Broderick feared discovery, but luck again favored her; no one was near the rear of the hotel.

She passed quickly along, keeping in the trees which fringed the north side of the village, and had nearly reached Ralston's house when, without any warning, a hand was laid upon her shoulder. She uttered a cry and would have sprung away, but the grasp was not to be broken and she was turned around without ceremony.

What she saw did not serve to add to her composure.

She stood facing Dave Buzzard.

Which one of the brothers it was she did not know, but that it was one of them his towering form plainly indicated. He was still paler than usual, but he possessed wonderful recuperative powers and had rallied a good deal from his injury.

Mildred was badly frightened, as her pale face showed, and she would have escaped him had it been possible.

"Not so fast, my beauty," he roughly said.

"I want to talk with you, an' when I feel that way I generally talk."

"I—I am listening," faltered Miss Fenton.

"So I see," he answered, smiling with pleasure at sight of her alarm. "I reckon you know me."

"Yes."

"I'm Dave Buzzard, born brother o' Ralston's wife, but no brother o' hern now. Havin' told ye who I be, you kin see, mebbe, that it'll be best to talk."

"Yes, sir."

"Hal' ha! Quiet ez a lamb, ain't ye? Wal, fu'st an' foremost, I want to know what you're doin' in Rube Ralston's house?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

DAVE BUZZARD SEEKS AN ALLY.

"I do not understand what you mean," Mildred replied.

"Wal, I reckon I kin make myself plain. You're at Rube's with some game in view. I know that; you're sailin' under false colors. Now, I say, what game be you tryin' to work?"

"I am not trying to work any game," she answered, freshly alarmed.

"Tell that to her blind!" Dave retorted.

"Don't ye think I've got eyes an' a brain?"

Come, gal, no tomfoolery. You ain't dealin' with no chicken now, an' you may ez wal come right down ter ther facts o' ther case."

Miss Fenton looked vainly about her for help. She knew Dave was no friend of Colorado Rube, and ought not to object if the Strong Arm had other enemies, but she would not reveal the secret, and every minute in his company was one of terror.

Desperado that he was, he might yet see fit to murder her. She wondered at his audacity in coming near the village at such a time, but it showed that the popular estimate of his reckless courage was correct.

"You are entirely mistaken," she persisted. "I am only stopping there for a few weeks, and paying my board while I do stop, and—"

"Don't try to work in any more 'ands.' What does it matter? Rube Ralston will die too soon fur you ter win ther game. Let us speak o' suchin' else. Do ye know Zetta Willis, ther mayor's daughter?"

"Yes, I know her," was the curt reply.

"Ye do? Wal, ye say it right cheerful, anyhow. So do I know her. What would ye say ef I told you I come hyar ter get her?"

"I'm willing you should have her."

"Just what I reckoned. She's ther friend o' ther Ralstons, an' though you smile ez nice ez a cat, you don't like ther friends. Yas, I come hyar arter her, but I see they hed set a guard over her, an' that plan goes up in blue smoke. Gal, you an' me needn't be enemies; we both hate Rube Ralston. Now, I hev a proposal ter make ter you. Some day you may need a strong hand an' an iron grip ter help ye. Count me in fur ther work, ef you'll do me a favor."

"I will hear it."

"I want Zetta Willis. Ef you will play some trick ter give her inter my hands, you an' me will be friends."

Dave no longer looked terrible to Mildred. Having avowed his friendship for her, she began to feel calm enough to notice his splendid physique and bold, though irregular, face. He had grown earnest, too, and he towered like a king of forest trees above her, giving her the idea that his good-will was not to be despised.

She thought quickly. Broderick, too, desired Zetta, but his female ally was not so scrupulous that she hesitated to play him false. The only question was, could she do it, and execute the plot in a way so he would not suspect her treachery?

"It is impossible to do anything to-night," she replied.

"Of course; that's out o' ther question. I didn't mean ter-night. O' course we shall take our time. Ther only question is—mind ye don't answer from fear o' me, fur I don't want any sech allies—will ye try in good faith ter help me when ther time comes?"

"I will!" Mildred promptly answered.

"Good!"

"How shall it be done?"

"We can't settle that now, but I know o' no better way than fur you ter decoy her outside ther village, whenever we be ready, an' let me seize her."

"I'll do my best. When shall I see you again?"

"I don't know. Things is mixed up at present. Hev ther men o' ther town marched ag'in' the Roost?"

"Yes."

"Much good may it do 'em," said Dave, with a grin.

"What do you intend to do to avenge your brother's death?"

"Eh?"

"I say, what revenge will you take for Tom Buzzard's death?"

Dave started back and his pale face became whiter. Then he grasped Mildred's arm again.

"What d'ye mean?" he asked, in a husky whisper. "Do ye mean to say Tom is dead?"

"Don't you know it?" faltered Mildred. "I—I thought—"

"Speak, quick! Has harm come ter Tom?"

"He is dead."

His hand fell away from her arm, and he stood before her with an expression on his face she never forgot. Consternation, rage and sorrow were strangely blended, and she had never supposed the human countenance capable of such a panoramic display.

"Who killed him?" he demanded, with sudden fierceness.

"It was a man named Apollo Abe. I suppose you know Ralston went to rescue his wife, and a stranger helped him and shot your brother. This was Apollo Abe."

The giant's hands worked on his rifle as though he would crush the barrel, and his form was shaken by deep emotion, but when he spoke his voice was calm, though husky.

"I ain't see'd none o' ther boyes sence they left ther Roost yesterday ter kidnap Mona. I have been nigh ther village for over an hour, an' I made ont that Rube had rescued her, but I didn't know that. Dead! Tom Buzzard dead!"

Mildred wished herself anywhere but there at that moment, for she knew not what he

might do in his anger, but his self-control was the more remarkable, because it had always been his way, and the way of his brothers, to give full vent to their feelings.

He asked for an explanation, and Mildred told all she knew. When it was done he also asked for a personal description of Apollo Abe, even to the minutest particular, and paid careful attention to all she said.

"That'll do," he said at last. "It ain't safe fur you ter be so long with Dave Buzzard, fur ef they diskivered ye, it would go hard with ye. Besides, I want ter be alone. Tom Buzzard dead!"

He struck his rifle-barrel as though it had been a human foe; but his ebullition soon passed.

"I'll see ye ag'in afore long," he added. "D'ye see that rock over yender?"

"Yes."

"That shall be our post-office. Go thar each day at evenin' an' mornin'. Look in ther mornin' fur messages from me; ef you hev aught ter say, leave a note in the evenin'. I'll be around ev'ry night. I kin read—Mona taught me that."

The last words were slowly spoken, as though they recalled a flood of unwelcome recollections, but he soon went on:

"Thar will be hot times hyar now, an' it won't be ter your hurt that you hev one o' ther Buzzards fur a friend. I'll tell ther rest, an' no harm shall come ter you. I'm goin' ter look fur my brothers now. Whar they be I don't know, but you kin bet high ther man-hunters won't find 'em."

Without any further adieu, he turned, strode through the bushes to the adjacent rocks, and was soon lost to the woman's view.

His prediction proved true. Colorado Rube's party returned an hour after dark, unsuccessful. They had visited both Sugar-Loaf and Bull's Head, but the Roost and the cave where Tom Buzzard died were alike vacant.

The fact that the body was gone showed that Jack at least had been active, but there was nothing to tell where the giants then were. The foothills furnished abundant hiding-places, and those who had hunted for them returned weary and discouraged.

Ralston and Apollo Abe were the only ones who retained their confidence. The latter had proved himself a most valuable lieutenant, and Rube was so impressed with the idea that he was just the man who was wanted during Hotspur's crisis that he invited him over to the house to consider measures of offense and defense.

By that time of course Mildred had returned, and Abe was presented to her with due ceremony. Mrs. Ralston did not wear the melancholy face the jolly stranger had expected. She mourned for her brother to a certain degree, but after all he had done she did not feel called upon to regret anything more than that he had died in the midst of his sins; and the fact that she was restored to her home and husband was cause for abundant thanksgiving.

Consequently Apollo Abe did not feel called upon to wear a funereal expression, much to his pleasure, and he now and then allowed his jolly fancy free play.

He was polite and chivalrous in his manner toward the ladies to an exaggerated degree, but, though Mildred did not seem at all pleased with his gallantry, he never made himself offensive to Ralston nor his wife.

The future of Hotspur was seriously considered, and Mona made no objection when her husband said that he thought every effort ought to be made to exile the Buzzards from the vicinity.

In his opinion it was absurd for a place of such size to submit to terrorism from a handful of men.

Later he approached a subject Miss Fenton had much rather he had left alone.

"In the midst of our other business," he said, addressing her, "we must not forget the disappearance of Colonel Nelson. It troubles me, and I fear he has met with foul play."

"I have a theory in the case," she answered, hiding her vexation.

"What is it?"

"I think the man who registered was another Nelson."

"Hardly. The handwriting was that of our old friend."

"Are you sure?"

"Certainly."

"Well, it does not follow he has met with trouble. He may have gone away again."

"Do you suppose he would come here and not see us?"

Mildred hesitated. She would gladly have furnished affirmative proof, but as she could not, she had to acknowledge that it did not seem likely.

"I take it he was a friend of yours, Miss Fenton?" said Apollo Abe.

"Yes," she answered curtly.

"He was her father's old-time friend, and he became a sort of guardian for her," explained Ralston.

"That's a good sort of a man to know," said Abe, with a laugh. "When did you see him last, miss?"

Mildred mentioned the date, as curtly as before.

"Where?"

She could have annihilated the questioner.

"At Lincoln, Nebraska."

"Where did he go then?"

"Oh, I don't know: where his business took him, I suppose," she retorted, darting an angry look at the unmoved stranger.

"I must look into this matter," he calmly said. "I have done some detective work in my life, and it wouldn't be at all strange if I could hunt this colonel up. Will you describe him, miss?"

"Not being good at descriptions, I will refer you to Mr. Ralston," she answered. "I do not care to talk lightly on such a subject—it pains me."

So saying, she changed her seat in such a way as to prevent further cross-questioning on his part. He looked after her with a twinkle in his eyes.

"I should say she was more mad than sad," he observed to Colorado Rube.

The latter looked at Mildred in silence. She did not seem to feel the interest in Nelson which was to be expected, and this exhibition of temper surprised him.

On her own part, Mildred was thinking:

"Who is this stranger? Are all his questions chance ones? I hope so, but I can't get rid of the impression that he knows more about me than is safe, and I fear I have found an enemy who will make trouble."

CHAPTER XXV.

COLORADO RUBE'S HEAVY HAND.

JOHN BRODERICK was by no means satisfied with the way matters were working in his vendetta against the Strong Arm of Hotspur City.

He hated the man bitterly. There was an old-time drama in Arizona which had aroused all the dark passions in Broderick's revengeful nature and made him desirous of crushing Ralston.

To have shot him would have been weak satisfaction. Death ends all earthly troubles, and the bullet which goes true gives a man little time to suffer. Hence, it was his ambition to break his enemy's heart before he killed him.

Having but a feeble idea of the strong attachment between Ralston and his wife, he thought he had only to introduce Mildred to the household to win Rube from his allegiance and begin the work; hence, the forged letter purporting to be from Colonel Nelson.

The first check to his plans was the appearance of Nelson at Hotspur, but, as we have seen, he faced the danger then and disposed of him with celerity. He had no fear that the mountain chasm would give up its dead.

But a more serious difficulty lay in his way. Rube did not succumb to Mildred's fascinations. On the contrary, while calmly polite, it seemed probable that he had taken a dislike to her.

One hope remained; he must make the Strong Arm believe that his wife loved some other man.

The coming of Apollo Abe furnished just the man the plotter deemed necessary. A careless, happy-go-lucky, gallant and rather good-looking fellow, he was just the one upon whom to shift the curse.

"If that fails," said Broderick, grating his teeth, "I'll join my fortunes with the Buzzards and make the most of circumstances. In any case, Ralston dies. If necessary, I'll send word to Arizona, and the Vigilantes will be mighty glad to put a rope around Captain Redspur's neck."

He was seated in the saloon of the Old Rye Hotel, the evening after the expedition against the Roost, when thus thinking, and he started a little as a voice sounded at his elbow.

"I beg your pardon, pard, but will you take poison with me?"

Broderick looked up into the careless face of Apollo Abe.

"I don't care if I do, thank you."

They sampled Chipp's whisky and then sat down together. By that time Broderick was reconciled to his companion's presence, and he resolved to try and work him.

A desultory conversation ensued, beginning with Abe's account of the visit to Buzzard's Roost, and it was not until the plotter thought he had made a favorable impression that he ventured to approach the subject nearest his mind.

"How do you like Hotspur?" he asked.

"Well, I haven't fairly decided," Apollo Abe replied. "Now, I am a man who likes fun. I admire to go into a town and kick up my heels like a colt in clover. That's the kind of a jumping-jack this court is. But, lol here is Hotspur, the town is all broke up. The Buzzards have skinned the socks off the people. Consequently, unless there is fighting, I'm left, badly left; and you'll see me leave before long."

"Never mind the men of Hotspur; let them shiver before the Buzzards' wrath if they will. What of the ladies? That's the society I like."

"Pard, put it there!" exclaimed Abe. "So do I!"

"Well, what's the trouble then?"

"I'm not acquainted, and—"

"I thought you said you had been to Ralston's."

"So I have, but—"

"What did you think of Miss Fenton?"

"She's not to be sneezed at, now I do assert."

"And Ralston's wife?" slyly continued Broderick.

"She's a clipper, but she's married."

"She is also a Buzzard," was the dry reply.

"Now, I dare say Mrs. Ralston is a fine woman, but there's no doubt but she would enjoy a flirtation with such a man as you."

Apollo Abe complacently pulled his long mustache.

"Do you really think so?" he asked.

"I am sure of it. Now, I have been in Hotspur long enough so that I feel an interest in the place, and don't want any man to come here and say our city is dull, so I'll do all I can for you."

"Pard, put it there!"

Once more Abe reached out his hand and fervently shook Broderick's.

"If you'll help me to turn this desert into a smiling oasis, I'm your life-long servant," he declared.

"I'll do it, but this is no place for the talk. Some one might overhear us and carry the news to Ralston. Come to my room!"

Abe looked at his watch.

"I can't do it now, for I have an engagement. I don't want to break, but this other matter will keep. I'll see you to-morrow evening. Name your time and place, and you'll find me on hand like a bed bug."

"Very good. Come to my room at eight o'clock."

"I'll be there, pard; bet your boots on it!"

And then Apollo Abe left the hotel.

"Good!" thought Broderick. "The plot is sure to work. This reckless fool is like wax in my hands and ready for anything, and I'll make him do some compromising thing. Then, by the aid of a few forged letters, I'll see that Ralston's heart is harrowed up to the proper pitch!"

Guards patrolled Hotspur throughout that night, for it was expected the Buzzards would make some hostile movement, and a second party watched the house on Sugar-Loaf top, but no one saw the giant brothers.

Had they been ordinary men it would have been thought that they were frightened away, but, as it was, they were only giving further proof of their cunning.

They were biding their time to take revenge.

It was a relief to many when day dawned. Mayor Mumford came out looking as though he had been ill; despite the fact that his house had been guarded all night, he had slept but little.

He had arrived at a conclusion. For just three days he would retain his office as mayor, and then he would step down and out. More than that, he would take the first stage away from the city, and not pause short of St. Louis.

He confided his plans to Zetta, alone, and she did not object. She, too, had grown afraid of Hotspur, but it was a little peculiar that she thought of Neal Bishop and wondered whether, if they left the place, she would ever see him again. She was free to acknowledge to herself that she had a deep interest in the mysterious young man.

That evening Apollo Abe met Broderick in his room according to agreement, and was warmly received.

"I have been working up your case to-day," said the plotter, as soon as they were comfortably seated.

"Well, I hope you've got the details down fine, by this time," said Abe, with interest.

"I think I have."

"It's a mighty good plan to have a friend in such a case. Just develop your plan, pard."

"Oh! it's very simple. You are to make yourself agreeable to Mrs. Ralston, and, my word for it, she will not be indifferent to you. If she is, I am prepared to fix it."

"How?"

"Well, you see I am a skillful penman, and, with some of her handwriting for a guide, I have written a letter purporting to be from her to you, and breathing undying affection. I defy any one to detect that it is a forgery. If she is cold, you can show her the letter, call her attention to the writing, and swear to show it to her husband unless she gives you a share of her affection."

"Will that work?" dubiously asked Abe.

"Bet your life it will. It's easy to scare a woman when you have everything well fixed. She will know that if Ralston sees it he will really believe she wrote it, and then her great point will be to keep him from seeing it. Oh! the game is as straight as a string and it can't fail."

Broderick spoke glibly, but no one knew better than he that his plot was weak. He had taken no pains to make it strong. All he wanted was to get Abe really into the scheme, and then betray him to Colorado Rube. Taken with

the forged letter in his pocket, it would seem to condemn both him and Mrs. Ralston, and thus he would succeed in breaking up his enemy's home.

"I reckon you're right," Abe acknowledged. "Give me a squint at the letter."

Broderick took it from his pocket, but as he passed it over another hand than Abe's fell upon and snatched it away. A long arm had been passed over his shoulder and the letter seized.

He sprang to his feet and then stood dumb with consternation.

Colorado Rube stood before him!

The Strong Arm of Hotspur had never looked more imposing. Standing erect, his eyes flashed with indignation and his face had an expression before which Broderick shrunk like a whipped cur.

"I'll take charge of the letter!" coolly announced Ralston. "My pocket is the proper place for it."

Broderick tried to speak, but his voice died away in an indistinct gurgle.

"You cowardly bound!" continued Rube, not raising his voice, but speaking in a way which made the schemer tremble, "there are no words in the English language fit to express my contempt for you. I know you at last. You and I have hated each other ever since you came to Hotspur, and by the help of your tool you hoped to deal me a coward's blow. It has failed, and now you shall feel my vengeance."

"I have done no harm," Broderick answered, trying to put a touch of defiance into his voice.

"Right you are, and you could not in the way you have planned, but luck has given me an insight into your game, and it will go no further."

"I'll be even with you yet!" muttered the plotter.

"You shall have all the chance you want, for I am about to show you how I deal with curs like you. I am going to whip you!"

He thrust the letter into his pocket and advanced a step, but Broderick fell back.

"Keep away!" he exclaimed. "I warn you not to touch me. Raise a hand and I will send a bullet through you!"

His hand sought a concealed revolver, but Rube laughed mockingly and leaped forward. Broderick tried to draw the weapon, but the attempt was a failure. He was seized in a crushing embrace and forced back, and then his teeth rattled as his punishment commenced.

Apollo Abe hastened forward and Broderick began to breathe more freely, but Rube sent out one fist, and Abe fell over a chair, and after that lay perfectly still.

Broderick could never afterward have described what followed, even if he had wished to. He was dimly conscious of trying to make a defense and scoring a failure, and all the while a torrent of blows was being rained upon him. None of them were given with full force; it was Rube's intention to punish, not to seriously injure, and he did his work well.

When he was done he pushed his victim over into a chair, and Broderick remained there, the worst whipped man seen in Hotspur for some time.

"That'll do for now," said the Strong Arm, coolly, "but I warn you that if I catch you at your tricks again you will not come off so easily. I don't allow any man to play the roots on me, and you had better take the hint in time."

He turned to Apollo Abe, who groaned dismally.

"Take some of that advice for yourself," the avenger added. "You have proved yourself a serpent, but I'll let you off light this time. If I get after either one of you again it'll be a good-by game. That's all—good-night!"

And he walked out of the room as coolly as though nothing unpleasant had occurred.

For several minutes there was silence in the room, and then Apollo Abe raised himself to a sitting position.

"Do we live, or don't we?" he muttered, as though he really wished for information on the subject.

"We live, and live for vengeance!" hissed Broderick, springing to his feet. "Man, where was your 'sand? Did one blow take it all away?"

"It knocked me into the middle of next week," mournfully admitted Abe. "You got more blows than I did, but mine had a charge of powder behind it that would make a hundred-pound cannon kick."

"I am a mass of bruises," said Broderick, huskily, "but I live for vengeance. Up with your hand and let us swear to kill the dog who has humbled us!"

"I thank you," Apollo Abe replied, "but I never meddle with a mule's heels but once. Ralston could lick ten like me, and I don't mean to give him another chance."

He was fixed in this resolution, and when Broderick saw it he said no more. He wanted no lukewarm adherent. Abe left the room and he was left alone.

Words can but poorly describe the tempest of hatred which raged within him. Already his head was tender and swelled, and he hastened to care for it; but while he worked one thought only was in his mind—to be avenged on Colorado Rube!

CHAPTER XXVI.

BRODERICK HAS AN UNWELCOME ENCOUNTER.

WHEN Apollo Abe left the room he also left the hotel, but, not far away, he met Colorado Rube.

"Well, are you satisfied?" he asked.

"Perfectly," Ralston replied, "and I thank you heartily for putting me on the track of Broderick's game."

"That's all right, but what about the blow you gave me?"

"Did it hurt?" asked Rube, laughing.

"You dropped your hand a *leetle* too hard. I thought I was in an observatory, and looking at the stars through a forty-horse power telescope. However, it don't count; I've shown you Brod is just the clothes-pin I took him to be."

"I am not surprised, but he has a lesson he won't forget right away."

"Not if the signs of the times are reliable. He'll have a head on him to-morrow that won't fit his shoulders, you bet!"

"Now, then, I would like more light on this subject. I have reason to believe you know more about Broderick than you have confessed. As much as you have done for me, I would like to have you go further and make a clean breast of it. At your request I have abandoned my idea of driving the fellow out of town, though he is not a fit person to have here. Why do you wish him to remain?"

"I wish I could divulge the whole business, but circumstances forbid. I do know something about Mr. Broderick, and I want to know more. To drive him away would be to scare him off the game he is after. Leave it to me and I'll pull through, never fear."

"You are hunting him down?"

"I am, a few, you bet," said Apollo Abe, with an earnestness not to be questioned.

"Well, it shall go as you say, though I have doubts as to my wisdom in agreeing to it. Work your game, but, remember one thing, if Broderick drops on me again when I'm out of temper, off goes his head."

"Don't ask for the earth, pard. Go slow, and one of these days Broderick will go up the spout on the run."

Some time longer the men conversed, and then they separated and Ralston went home. Abe looked after him for a while and then laughed lightly.

"I think I'll wander a bit; I'm not in a mood for peaceful rest. This scene has stirred up my blood, and if Hotspur wasn't a law-abiding town it would do me good to hunt up two or three roughs and have a regular, old-fashioned fight. Heigh-ho! there are times when my fingers tingle to get at it, again, and I may do so despite the good resolutions. I was never made for a hum-drum life. First, however, I'll help Hotspur out of her trouble, just to keep my hand in, and in the meanwhile find out what that young female is trying to do at Ralston's. What is her game? I'll be shot if I know, but I'm going to find out. Ralston suspects her, but he's a deep one and says nothing. By George! I'd like him for a pard; he's all creation on the fight!"

Apollo Abe's eyes shone with the admiration he felt for a man with such gifts, but he wandered on peacefully, and those he met did not suspect what warlike thoughts were in his mind.

At that same hour an impressive scene was taking place in a cave on the east side of Sugar-Loaf. It was a place known to but few indeed; it is doubtful if any human foot had ever pressed its interior save those of four men who had so long been the kings of the peak.

This night they were all there, but one lay motionless on the damp bottom of the cave and would never speak again.

Despite the watch kept for them the Buzzards had succeeded in carrying the body of their dead brother from Bull's Head to Sugar-Loaf, and not only that, but boards had been brought from the Roost and a rude coffin made.

Into this last resting-place they raised the body, and then the box was lowered into the ready grave and filled to a level.

While they were working not a word was spoken, but in impressive silence the mortal remains of Tom Buzzard were forever covered from human view.

Then the survivors went to one side, drew out their pipes and began smoking, still without a word. There was no compact of silence, but no one seemed inclined to break the lull in conversation.

Dave no longer showed signs of his late injuries, and they were a sturdy-looking trio as they sat there.

"Hev either o' you a plan ter offer?" Bill finally asked.

"We leave that ter you?" Jack readily answered.

"I ain't in a mood fur much delay, an' I think it are about time Cy Mumford walked ther plank. I'm ther more anxious ter wine him out 'cause I think Ralston will take his place ez mayor, an' then thar'll be a carnival o' fun."

"An' Hotspur shall be a graveyard!" added Jack.

"Ay. So I've said, an' so it shall be. I won't let up till the place is in ashes, an' ther people scattered ter ther four winds o' heaven!"

Dave thought of Zetta, and silently resolved to save her from the wrath to come.

"So be it," said Jack. "We'll strike Mumford whenever you say—ther sooner ther better."

"Can't we take Ralston at ther same time?" Dave asked.

"We are not ready," Bill quickly answered. "He must see ther way Mumford goes an' larn ter dread us afore his turn comes. Let him be elected mayor; we'll make his reign ther merriest known ter man!"

The following day Broderick found himself a sore and miserable man. Judicious use of preventatives had so operated that only close examination would show that his head was swelled, and his eyes had not been injured, but he could hardly touch his head, it was so tender.

He was about discouraged and was seriously thinking of telling Mildred to quietly step out and disappear from Hotspur. After what had occurred there seemed little hope of making trouble between Ralston and his wife; and he could see no better way than to ally himself with the Buzzards.

But here a question arose. Would they take him?

He had a strong suspicion that they would not, and even if he had known where they were he would have hesitated to seek them.

They might regard him as a spy from the people of Hotspur and deal summarily with him as such.

Early in the forenoon he left the Old Rye and walked away from the village. Solitude was his best companion then.

Half-unconsciously, he bent his way toward Bull's Head and was soon in the rough country which fringed its base.

He sat down and gave himself up to thought, and soon became so absorbed that he did not perceive the approach of another man who came sauntering down the gulch. The latter was more observant and, seeing Broderick, came to a halt.

It was Neal Bishop.

For a while he hesitated, and then, as though acting on a sudden impulse, came rapidly forward.

Hearing his footsteps, Broderick looked up and then arose to his feet, while a look of anger and disgust arose to his face.

"You don't seem pleased to see me," observed Neal, coolly.

"I certainly am not."

"Well, that's no great disappointment."

"When did you return to Hotspur?"

"I didn't return; I have not been away. That was all a pretense for your benefit. Since I disappeared from your view, I have been leading a hermit life at Bull's Head."

"That's what you are best fitted for," growled Broderick.

"Your opinion is of no consequence to me."

"It strikes me you have grown independent, all at once."

"So I have. I have resolved to cast off my fetters, defy you and be a man," Neal sturdily replied.

"Defy me? In what way?"

"In all ways."

"You forget Red River Run."

"I forget nothing, but I am no longer to be frightened by your threats. You can betray me as soon as you see fit. I have been a weak and cowardly fool, but I shall cringe to you no longer."

Broderick's face hardened. This bold stand troubled him. Neal Bishop had the power to tell unpleasant things about him, and it looked as though he had the will also.

"You will find it to your interests to go slow," he said, in a threatening voice. "If I see fit to speak, I can put your neck in a noose. When you go on trial for murder, you will not be so pert."

Bishop's face was pale and uneasy, but he did not waver.

"I am prepared to face the danger when it comes. Very likely it would result disastrously to me, but though there is blood on my hands, you and I know it was not of my seeking."

Broderick laughed mockingly.

"Tell that to your judges and see what they will say."

"Sneer on!" was the steady reply. "I want you to know, John Broderick, or whatever you choose to call yourself, that I am no longer to be frightened by a word. I have been weak and vacillating, but in the solitude of Bull's Head I have resolved to be a man, and from this day you can no longer say: 'I am your master!'"

Broderick's hand rested on his revolver. Bishop had for some time been a barrier to his complete success. His sentiments of honor—foolish scruples, as the plotter regarded them—had been bad enough, but in this new mood he bade fair to be even more dangerous.

Would it not be the best way of all to use a revolver and leave him forever in the gulch?

Unknown to either man, there was a witness and a listener to this interview. When Broderick left Hotspur he had been followed, and at that very moment a man was lying on the rocks at the top of the gulch, forty feet above, taking heed of all that was said.

The listener was Apollo Abe.

Unknown to Abe, a third party was near the place. Not far away three men were traversing the ridge. Circumstances had made it necessary for them to keep close watch when they were abroad, and thus it was that they chanced to observe the man on the rock.

This party was composed of Bill, Jack and Dave Buzzard.

Apollo Abe was a man easily recognized anywhere, and as Jack had marked him well when Tom was killed, he did not fail to recognize him then.

He quickly made known his discovery to his brothers, and their blood bounded at thought of revenge on the man who had slain one of their number. They spread out like a fan and began slowly closing in on him, only deterred from instant action by the fact that some drama was being enacted in the gulch, the nature of which was unknown to them.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOSTILE ELEMENTS MEET.

APOLLO ABE was too much interested in the scene transpiring below him to suspect that there was danger in the rear, and he neither saw nor heard the three men so stealthily creeping toward him.

He did not allow a word of the conversation in the gulch to escape him.

"I have no wish to be your master," said Broderick, sullenly, in answer to Bishop's last remarks. "All I ask of you is that you will keep away from me."

"I believe the right to come and go is one we all have," said Neal, "and I decline to be dictated to. One thing I will say, however; I shall no longer try to direct the course of my sister. I have made my last argument, and she may go where she will, and do what she chooses, after this."

"That's all right as far as it goes, but are you going to betray me to Ralston?"

Apollo Abe grew freshly interested.

"Not having formed a definite plan, I don't know."

"I desire you to answer—to promise."

"What if I refuse?" retorted Neal.

"Then, by Heaven, one of us stays in this gulch—a dead man!"

Broderick quickly drew his revolver as he spoke, but Neal showed that he had not been day-dreaming. His own weapon came up quickly, a little ahead of the other.

"Hands up!" he cried, sharply. "Try to turn that weapon on me and you are a dead man!"

Apollo Abe drew and cocked his own revolver, unconscious that the Buzzards were almost at his side. They intended to have their prey without fail, but they could hear angry voices from the gulch and intended, also, to know what ground was beneath their feet before striking.

The case was assuming a complicated aspect. Broderick saw that Neal literally "had the drop" upon him, and he was not fool enough to risk his life just then. Later, he would show his talons. He raised his hands.

"That's all right," said Neal, coolly, "but I object to your retaining your revolver. Drop it!"

Broderick's cup of bitterness was filled to the brim. He hesitated, and Apollo Abe chuckled with satisfaction.

"Drop it!" repeated Bishop, sharply.

The order was obeyed; the revolver fell rattling to the ground.

Neal thoroughly enjoyed his triumph. He had borne every species of abuse and insult from the man before him, and it was a pleasant change to at last have matters his own way, if only temporarily. He did not intend to do his enemy serious harm, but he did mean to humble him.

"You are sealing your own doom," said Broderick, huskily.

"How so?"

"I have spared you for your sister's sake, fool that I was, but after this the world is not large enough for us both."

"In other words, you want the earth. Well, I refuse to leave it, and as I don't like your company, I have a proposal to make. We will fight a duel."

"I thought you were opposed to shedding blood," sneered the elder man.

"I make this an exceptional case, in order to purify the world. You may pick up your revolver—wait a moment!—on condition that you don't turn the muzzle my way until you have my leave. I am going to give you a chance in a fair duel, but I will shoot you off-hand if you try a trick."

"Where shall we get our seconds?"

"I'll act in that double capacity."

The words came cheerfully from Apollo Abe's lips, but to them they seemed to sound from the sky. They looked up hastily, but at that mo-

ment Abe caught at the mass of vines which hung like a curtain over the side of the gulch and slid rapidly downward, much to the surprise of the would-be duelists.

His movement had been so sudden that the Buzzards had no time to seize or shoot him, but they were immediately aroused to action.

The slayer of Tom was at hand and they did not intend he should escape them.

Simultaneously they made a rush, and as a shower of loosened earth rattled down, those below looked up to see the remarkable spectacle of three men swinging from the vines.

Only one moment was the sight vouchsafed them; the giant brothers had not stopped to think that frail vines were poorly calculated to bear the weight of over six hundred pounds of human flesh; but with a series of quick, sharp snaps the mass gave way and they went shooting helplessly down.

The distance was forty feet, and, had the gulch been rock-lined, it would have been their last appearance on life's stage, but they fell on sand which was almost like a feather-bed, and not one was seriously injured.

They staggered to their feet in a dazed way, their ruling purpose still strong in their minds, but their weapons were scattered and they were not ready for work.

As for the other men, Broderick was in retreat, Neal stood irresolutely, but tolerably firm, and Apollo Abe was not at first visible to their searching gaze.

But he soon made his presence known.

"Here I am, gents, all ready for the matinee, if, as I suspect, I am the hair-pin you're looking after!"

They turned their gaze toward the point from which sounded the voice, but they saw only a bowlder with a head and pair of arms rising above it. In each hand was a revolver, the muzzles of which bore upon them, and the keen eyes of Apollo Abe looked along the barrels.

"Hands up!" he cried, in a ringing voice.

The Buzzards were reckless, desperate men, but they had not taken leave of their senses entirely. They saw that, in the language of the West, their enemy "held the drop," and his voice was one which carried conviction.

He had the power to kill them, and he would do it if they made a hostile move. They stood still, but their faces were the personification of hatred and baffled hostility.

"Stand where you are!" Apollo Abe continued. "I am not yet ready to be carved, and I say to you fairly that better men than you have succumbed to me. Revolvers were my toys in childhood; they've been my constant companions since. When I shoot to kill I never miss. Mark that down!"

While he spoke he was also thinking, and he was trying to contrive a way to take the three into Hotspur. That he could hold his own against them he never doubted, but could he capture them? They were wanted at Hotspur, and he wished to oblige the city.

"You mustn't think we're afeard o' yer pop-gun," said Bill Buzzard, recovering his power of speech. "Powder an' ball ain't no terror fur us. What I do ask o' you, though, is that you'll act the part o' a man. You may be ther champion shot o' ther West, but I'm ready ter meet you in duel. You killed my brother, an' only blood kin wipe out ther deed. Give me a chance an' I'll fight you!"

"I'm not fighting duels this week, but I'm laying around loose all the time, and whenever you feel like dropping on me, come ahead and say so. Pile in now, or wait till the clouds roll by; it's all one to me."

"You are a coward!" snarled Bill.

"I suppose what you say goes as it lays," said Apollo Abe, with a light laugh.

"Dar' ye fight me?"

"Wade in!"

"Give me a chance," said Bill, sullenly.

"Do you take this for a church festival, with a lottery for a side-show? If you want a chance, take it."

Bill Buzzard lost his head. Although the "drop" was on him, he resolved to risk all. He drew a revolver with a jerk, and it came up quickly, but as he did so there was a single report and it went flying away.

Apollo Abe had shot it from his hand.

"A little of that goes a good ways," said the blonde man, with his old, careless laugh.

"Don't try it again!"

"You are a coward if you don't give me a chance!" grated the eldest Buzzard.

"Do you want the earth? Come, now, for a modest man you are a hog. I'll tell you just what I'll do. I was thinking of taking you to Hotspur, as I suppose I ought to do anyway, but you settled the matter when you called me a coward. I've seen the time when I'd perforate a man for that, but I'm a peaceful citizen now and prefer that you furnish the proof. You are free to go as soon as you choose, and free to drop on me whenever you see an opening. How's that?"

Bill was mad for vengeance, but that remarkable shot had cleared his head a good deal and he was not inclined to be a fool. He knew that Apollo Abe, having the "drop," could play havoc with them whenever he saw fit to open

fire, and if he insisted on taking them to Hotspur, trouble would ensue.

Bitter as was the thought of leaving the man who had killed their brother, he had made them a most generous offer and it would be folly to refuse it.

"Why not fight a duel?" he slowly asked.

"And give your amiable brother a chance to chip in? Thank you for nothing; I am not so big an idiot as that."

"Will you meet me at a named pint an' fight?"

"I'm not naming pints or quarts this week, William; all I've got ter say is my flag waves over Hotspur for some time to come, and if you catch me napping, wade in. Is that plain English? Wade in!"

"Do it," said Dave, in an undertone. "We'll have him yit. He can't escape."

"That's solid," coincided Jack.

"So be it," said Bill, sullenly. "Luck is ag'in' us now; we accept."

"Then let me see you amble."

They waited for no more, but stalked rapidly away. Abe watched them for awhile, and then arose and cheerfully faced Neal Bishop, who had stood a silent spectator, but ready to do his part if a fight ensued.

"I reckon we had better waltz away ourselves. Those galoots are just the kind to double on their trail and get back for a shot on the sly. It ain't my style to let them in."

"We ought to have captured them," said Neal, slowly.

"So we had; I acknowledge the corn; but when Bill called me a coward I lost my head. Hang it, pard, it's hard to hold one's hand in such a case. There was a time, in the old days when I—but never mind. Well, they're gone; do we go too?"

"Of course."

"I hanker for your company on the trail; I have a word to whisper in your ear. Where is that gay Broderick?"

"He fled as soon as he saw the Buzzards," said Neal, scornfully.

"So I opined, and I take him to be a white-livered dog at heart. Now, I'm free to confess I played the listener to your confab with him, and if it won't be too brash, I'd like to know what it means."

"To what do you refer?" asked Bishop, with an air of annoyance.

"The secret between you and Broderick."

The two were walking side by side toward Hotspur. Neal looked fixedly at the ground, and Apollo Abe, closely scanning his face, saw that he was not in a mood for confession.

"I think it is nothing that would interest you," he said.

"My esteemed friend, I'll bet my hat it would. What is Broderick's game at Hotspur?"

"I am unable to say."

"Do you mean you will not?"

"If you want it in plain English—yes!"

Apollo Abe laughed carelessly.

"Your wish is my law until I can undermine it, but know what Broderick's game is I will. Of this, more anon. For now, let us go peacefully on toward Hotspur City."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ZETTA'S DANGER.

THE Buzzard brothers were making their headquarters in a cave midway between Sugar-Loaf and Bull's Head. It was a point where no serious search had ever been made. Both peaks received due attention, but the less broken country between them did not seem to afford the opportunity desired by the giants.

So reasoned the men of Hotspur, but, as we have seen, they were wrong.

The evening after the events last recorded, the three brothers were in their cave. A fire burned at one side; overhead a torch was thrust in a crevice. The men were formed in a half-circle near the fire, all smoking, but in silence.

The first violence of the passion freshly aroused by Apollo Abe was past; they had raged and made fresh threats, but each was now busy with his thoughts.

Bill was thinking of Apollo Abe. He realized that the blonde man was a somewhat remarkable individual, one who could shoot and laugh and never lose his composure, and as he had added to the score against him, Buzzard was resolved that he should die.

Jack's thoughts were on their vendetta as a whole.

Dave, on the contrary, was thinking of a woman. As has before been said, it was his creed that it was a weakness for a man to care of one of the opposite sex, but, ever since he saw Zetta Willis, the work had been going on, checked and rebuffed now and then by his views before mentioned, but it was not to be smothered.

This night he was contemplating the seizure of the girl, and, subsequently, deserting his brothers. Only his share in the vendetta kept him from prompt action. He would not desert until Hotspur City had been made to taste their vengeance, but the sooner he possessed Zetta, the better it would be for him.

He did not think of wooing her as girls are

usually wooed. He admitted, without mental argument, that such a thing would be useless, for he knew she looked upon him as a sort of human tiger; but he had a dim intention of being kind to her after she was stolen, of making her return his "liking," as he expressed it, and he did not think it impossible that he would yet be reconciled to Mona.

Try as he would he could not hate his sister, and he had decided that, when Ralston was dead, she might come and live with him and Zetta, failing to perceive how grotesquely unnatural such a reconciliation would be after he had helped kill her husband.

After a long period of silence he arose, took his rifle, and prepared to go out.

"Whar now?" asked Bill.

"Nowhar," was the stolid reply.

Bill shrugged his shoulders, and turned his gaze again on the fire. He had no more to say.

Dave left the cave and strode away. At the end of twenty minutes he entered another cave, lit a torch, and was busy for some time with a pencil and sheet of paper. It was his hand that had written the warnings posted in Hotspur City. Bill and Jack could not have written them to save their lives. Dave, however, had yielded so far to his sister, years before, that he learned a little, and though his spelling was eccentric, as we have seen, he could make a readable document.

When it was done, he left the cave and started for Hotspur. He knew the citizens were watching for him, but this was a matter of indifference.

He went straight to the point he had named to Mildred Fenton as the post-office, where they were to leave letters if they had anything to say.

He had written to her directing that she betray Zetta into his power the following evening, and he believed she would do it. What was to be her reward he did not know, but he did not intend to prove ungrateful.

The letter was left at the proper point, and then Dave returned to the cave.

There was little visible change at Hotspur City. Neal Bishop had taken up his residence at the Old Rye Hotel, but he took no notice of Broderick, and seemed to make no effort to learn the state of affairs at Ralston's. Apollo Abe was as genial as ever to Neal, but the latter listened coldly. He wanted nothing to do with either of them.

Broderick was waiting to decisively decide what to do. The game at Ralston's seemed hopeless, and his sore head told him it would hardly do to set fresh plots in motion. As for the alliance with the Buzzards, which he had considered, he no longer desired it.

He had run away from one chance to make their acquaintance, and fully intended to run again if he saw them.

Mayor Mumford retained the robe of his office, but he was never seen outside unless accompanied by the Strong Arm of Hotspur, and Makepeace Mullin acted as a guard when the chief dignitary was at home.

Colorado Rube had never appeared more at his ease, though a certain look on his face indicated that he was depriving himself of needed sleep in order to guard his house.

Daily searches for the men of Sugar-Loaf produced no good result. If they came near the Roost the watchers failed to discover it.

Yet, as we have seen, the Buzzards did not by any means keep themselves secluded, and as they knew the secret paths of Sugar-Loaf and Bull's Head better than any one else, they really ran less danger than would at first be thought.

Evening again.

Dave Buzzard had ventured as near the village as was safe. He was fully armed and on the alert for danger, but his thoughts ran in one channel nearly all the time.

"Will they come?"

Again and again he asked the question, his gaze directed toward the village. For reasons best known to himself time was precious. The Buzzard brothers, as a whole, had work to do that night, and his own scheme must be executed before the hour of the second one, or not at all.

Suddenly he started and bent forward to look more closely. Then a feeling of triumph came over him. He saw two female forms approaching through the darkness.

He knew them well.

They were Zetta Willis and Mildred Fenton.

When sure of the fact, he dropped to the ground and lay like a tiger awaiting his prey. The work must be well done. Should any alarm be sounded, they were so near the village that it was likely to be heard.

The giant was triumphant. His coveted prey was almost in his grasp; Mildred had lured her away as she had promised to do, and a brighter future seemed to stretch away ahead of him.

The two girls approached, and he heard them talking carelessly. Zetta did not seem to fear any danger, and their conversation was light and careless.

At last they came so near that their dresses almost touched him as he crouched on the ground, and then he leaped to his feet. Large as he was he was quick-motioned, and he had never used more dispatch than when he flung his arms about Zetta, at the same time pressing one hand over her mouth.

The plot was working well.

The girl comprehended her danger at once, and made a strong effort to escape, but she was wholly helpless in his muscular arms.

"Easy, girl, easy!" he muttered. "Nobody ain't goin' fur ter harm ye, an' ef you keep still, I'll swar ye will be well used."

Mildred had her part to play, and she did not fail to play it well.

"Sir!" she cried, simulating anger, "unhand this lady! Who are you, and how dare you molest us?"

All this had been arranged in advance, for Mildred, fearing Zetta might some time escape, would not leave a chance for her to say she appeared to be against her; but it sounded so grimly humorous to Dave that he chuckled aloud.

"I'm a holy terror from Puget's Sound," he answered; "an' I kin lick my weight in wildcats, an' lift myself by my boot-straps. See to it you don't git me mad, but jest take your head over ter whar ye live an' stay thar."

"Never!" exclaimed Mildred, tragically. "This lady is my friend. Release her, or I will attack you myself."

"Purty work ye'd make ez a stalwart rescuer," sneered Dave. "It takes a man, an' a mighty good one, ter git away with me."

Their game was working well; Zetta, helpless in the giant's arms, was listening to words which seemed to prove that Miss Fenton was really her friend; but Dave was by no means pleased with anything which detained him near Hotspur when he ought to be getting away. If he had been even less considerate for his female ally, it would have been better for him.

A sudden exclamation fell from Mildred's lips, and Dave, recognizing the fact that there was danger, wheeled, but he was too late. Some object fell heavily upon his head, and he dropped helplessly to the ground.

Neal Bishop stood over him, holding the club with which he had done such effective work.

Zetta, abruptly released, nearly fell, and then, recognizing Neal, uttered a cry of relief.

"Have no further fear, Miss Willis," he said. "The danger is over."

He then turned his gaze sternly upon Mildred. It was by no chance he was there. He had seen the two girls together, and as he knew Mildred was capable of anything, had followed to make sure of Zetta's safety. This precaution had proved a wise one, and though he did not intend to betray his sister in plain words, he had no words too strong to express his anger and contempt.

As for the traitress herself, she thought only of getting out of the difficulty safely.

"How fortunate you arrived!" she exclaimed; but she looked at the insensible giant and wished he would spring to his feet.

"It was, indeed, fortunate," said Neal, pointedly, while he also watched Dave warily.

"Once more, I thank you earnestly," said Zetta, trying to recover her composure. "It was rash for us to venture beyond the village, and it will teach me a lesson. What shall we do now?"

"The next thing is for you to go for help," Neal replied. "I will stand guard over this fellow until you return."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MAYOR'S MIDNIGHT VISITORS.

MILDRED caught at the chance of getting away.

"That is the best way," she said, quickly. "Come, Zetta, let us go."

"No!" said Neal, firmly. "One is enough. Miss Willis shall go for help, while you remain here."

It was an unwelcome proposal, but Mildred detected the undercurrent of menace in his voice and dared not rebel. She agreed, and Zetta hastened away for help.

"I thought to have no more to do with you," said Bishop, sternly, and addressing Mildred, "but there is no limit to your villainy. In Heaven's name, how could you be so base as to betray a helpless girl into Dave Buzzard's hands?"

"I did not—" began Mildred, with pretended indignation, but Neal imperiously interrupted:

"Spare your falsehoods; they will avail nothing with me. I know you and your ways. With whom will you next ally yourself? Broderick, Dave Buzzard—can it be you are the girl who was my playmate in childhood?"

"I only wish I wasn't," she sullenly answered.

"Always willful and hot-tempered, you were the idol of a loving mother and—"

"Enough! I will hear no more preaching!" hotly interrupted the woman. "You are the nightmare of my existence; beware that you don't carry it too far. A woman's hand has before now been known to strike in her own defense."

"Your threats trouble me as little as Broderick's. I am no longer the weak creature you have known me in the past. The secret you have held over my head I defy; I'll be a man, or nothing. One thing I insist upon. I will risk you with Colorado Rube, for I plainly see he is able to care for himself, but you shall not harm Zetta Willis. Swear it!"

"You love her!" sneered Mildred.

"Whether I do, or not, is my affair. Swear!"

"I will, on one condition. Let Dave Buzzard go free."

"Why?"

"If captured, he will betray me."

The argument, as she intended it, was not a strong one, but it suggested another possibility to Bishop. If she was unmasked it would also become known that he was her brother, and after that his chances with Zetta would be poor. It was not a commendable light in which to look at a matter where justice was at stake, but Neal at once wished the giant far away.

"I agree," he said, "but can it be done? Zetta is liable to return at any moment with help, and this fellow lies here like a log. What is to be done?"

Mildred dropped on her knees by Dave's side.

"He is already recovering. Stand where he cannot see you and I will get him away."

She spoke feverishly, for she felt that her whole future depended on getting Dave out of the way before any of the men at Hotspur arrived, but, much to her relief, the giant began to stir in earnest and then sat up.

He came to life with a clear mind and glared around like a wounded tiger.

"Whar is he?" he demanded.

"Gone!" replied Miss Fenton, "and you must imitate him if you would save your life. He has gone for the men of Hotspur to seize you—go, go at once!"

"Whar's ther gail?"

"He rescued her."

"Then ther jig is up, an' I'll skip," said Dave, but he showed no signs of fear. "Cuss ther feller! that's twice he's barked me. Do ye s'pose he kin live arter it? No! I'll hunt him ez I would a—"

"Go!" interrupted Mildred. "They are coming—don't you hear their voices? Go, quickly—go, go!"

"Yas, I hear them, an' I'll go; but I'll come back. We're goin' ter make Hotspur a graveyard. Gal, you did yer part wal, an' I thank ye. Good-night!"

He spoke and was gone, disappearing among the rocks with long, but firm, strides.

Neal emerged from his hiding-place.

"We must pretend he came to life and overpowered me," he said hurriedly. "See to it you act your part well."

He dropped to the ground, and when the men arrived they saw Mildred supporting his head in her arms. The temptation to do him a mortal injury as he lay thus, and place the blame at Dave Buzzard's door, was strong, but she conquered the impulse and did, indeed, act her part well—so well that the honest miners did not suspect they were being cheated.

Search was made for Dave Buzzard, but he was not to be found; but Neal Bishop, when he had seen Zetta safely home, felt that though he had stooped to deception he had done one good deed by saving the girl.

Midnight!

Mayor Mumford sat alone in his library. He was engaged in writing, but he often paused and settled into deep thought, for this was an important night of his life. He had fully decided to resign his office on the following day, and then leave Hotspur City, and he was impatient for the time to arrive.

He was resolved to no longer be mayor, where every hour was a nightmare.

"I am not the man for the place," he said for the hundredth time. "It needs a young, bold fellow like Ralston to rule in a mining-town. I will leave my mine in the hands of my superintendent and go to St. Louis for a while. This breeze will soon blow over, and then I'll return to Hotspur."

He resumed writing, unconscious of the fact that hostile eyes were observing his movements. The door had been opened a trifle, and in the space thus made was framed the sinister head of Bill Buzzard.

His expression was one of triumph, but he did not rashly venture on the scene. He had already avoided certain obstacles which Mumford had set as means of safety, and Bill scanned every corner of the room to see if a body-guard was visible.

None was to be seen, and he turned to Jack and Dave, who were close behind, and made a reassuring motion. Then the door was opened a little further, and the leader of the giants crossed the threshold.

The mayor heard nothing. His pen was moving more rapidly than before, and he was unconscious of the dark shadow hovering over him.

Closely followed by his brothers, Bill crept forward like a cat. Their expedition was a risky one, and it was a matter of vital impor-

tance to them that no alarm, however faint, was sounded.

All worked well for them.

A hand was laid on Mumford's shoulder. Somehow, as he wrote, the face of Bill Buzzard had stolen before him, in imagination, and at the touch he leaped up so suddenly as to almost overturn the table.

Then he stood dumb with terror.

Bill Buzzard was really before him, and at his back were his giant brothers—the three men whom Cyrus Mumford feared more than all the rest of the world.

The color retreated from his face, his eyes were wild and enlarged, and a trembling seized his limbs which caused him to sink back into his chair.

"We're hyar!" said Bill, in a deep voice. "We're hyar, an' we've come fur vengeance!"

Mumford's lips moved, but he did not utter a word.

"We're goin' ter give ye a sample o' what men git by lyin' ter ther Buzzards o' ther Roost," the desperado continued. "We lived thar until ye sought us out an' deceived us, lived ez pece'ble citizens, but ye stirred up a hornets' nest when ye sat down on us."

"Gentlemen," said the mayor, desperately, as he found the power of speech, "I assure you I never deceived you."

"Bah! you're a liar!"

"When I went to the Roost I told you Rube Ralston was against us, and so he was. He and I were friends, but he liked Rosseau better and wished to see him mayor. That was the truth, upon my word of honor. When your votes settled the matter and made me the mayor, all people who had the good of Hotspur at heart desired a healing of all quarrels. I offered Ralston the place of secretary and he took it. That is the story in brief, as I have told you before, and I am willing to swear you were never lied to nor deceived."

"We wouldn't believe ye ef ye swore a thousand times," broke in Bill, fiercely. "I say it was all a game. Ye wanted our votes, an' ye knowed ther only way was ter make us think we was votin' ag'in' Colorado Rube. You did it, an' we voted, but it'll be ther costliest 'lection Colorado ever see'd."

"Can't I convince you?" desperately asked the mayor.

"No, ye can't. We know jest what a villain you be. Yer trick hez been ther means o' killin' Tom Buzzard an'—"

"He was shot by a stranger to Hotspur."

"It makes no difference. It's one o' a series o' events risin' from your trick, an' we hold ye answerable for it. Furdur than that, we've come ter squar' ther account. Cy Mumford, you've got ter die!"

The mayor's face could not very well be any paler than it was, but his eyes rolled wildly as he looked from face to face, hoping to see one gleam of pity somewhere, but inexorable hatred was expressed instead. Bill was the spokesman of the party, but both Jack and Dave concurred in what he said.

"Gentlemen, you—you are making a mistake—" he began, tremulously; but Bill interrupted him.

"Ther mistake was made when you played the roots on us, but it's goin' ter be made right ter-night. Ef ye know any prayers, you may sing 'em over."

"I'm willing to pay you to spare me."

Bill laughed aloud.

"Not any. Money can't buy us."

"I'm a rich man, and I won't hesitate to pay five or ten thousand dollars."

"A hunder thousand wouldn't do it. Money ain't revenge, an' it's revenge we're arter. You've had fair warnin', an' ef you ain't ready, it's yer own fault. Jack, you watch ther clock an' tell me when five minutes is up. At ther eend o' that time, Mister Mayor Mumford dies!"

The unhappy mayor groaned aloud. Was he indeed doomed to die thus? Where was Makepeace Mullin—where the other guards he had stationed in the house? He dared not call for them, for he knew the first cry would be the signal for his death.

Bill Buzzard took out a long, glittering bowie, and the steady ticking of the clock showed that it was relentlessly moving on toward the termination of the allotted five minutes.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LOTTERY OF ASSASSINATION.

"Two minutes is up!"

It was Jack Buzzard's voice, remorselessly pitched, which broke the silence, and told that the brief reprieve was being steadily cut down.

Mumford gasped and made a fresh effort.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am not ready to die, and I stand ready to do all in my power to please you if you will spare me. I will give you twenty thousand dollars; I will resign my office and guarantee the election of whoever you may name for the office; I will—"

"You'll do nothin'," hoarsely broke in Bill Buzzard. "All we want o' you is yer life, an' that we're goin' ter hev. That's enough, an' ye needn't say any more. Jest hush up now, an'

when I've driv' this bowie home you won't keer a red cent whether school keeps or not."

"Three minutes!" pronounced Jack Buzzard.

Drops of unnatural perspiration trickled down the mayor's face. Oh! why had he been so mad as to accept the office? From the first he had desired to refuse it, and when he was over-persuaded he soon saw the thorns in the path of honors. Why had he delayed his resignation? What could he do to touch the pity, or cupidity, of these giant assassins?

His past unavailing efforts seemed to answer—nothing!

The ticking of the clock sounded fearfully loud and ominous. It had never sounded like that before. Each tick was like the beat of a funeral drum. A terrible nervousness seized the mayor, and had his limbs not been like lead, he would have leaped up and made a desperate effort which would have settled it one way or another, at once.

"Four minutes!"

The relentless voice of Jack Buzzard again sounded.

"Jest one minute more, old man," said Bill, gloatingly, "an' ther ticks are passin' on. Hear 'em! One, two, three, four, five—fine music, Mister Mayor, ain't it? That's a quarter gone. Only forty-five seconds left, an' still she bowls along like a carriage an' four. Let 'em hum; it's music, ain't it, mayor?"

He was playing, cat-fashion, with his victim. His mocking voice was the exultant note of a thoroughly depraved nature; it was a most horrible period of their lives.

"Jest half a minute," said Jack, unpityingly. "Watch ther clock, Mumford," said Bill.

The mayor *did* watch it. In his present mood he could not have turned his gaze aside if he would. How the seconds sped away! Did clock ever move so fast before?

"Fifteen seconds left!"

Bill Buzzard began to draw his knife along the leg of his boot. It was the last feather of tradition; the over-tasked mind of the unfortunate man could stand no more. He leaped to his feet with a wild cry which rung through and through the house, and then fell to the floor in a dead swoon.

A pair of languidly-opening eyes, a weary, weak and useless body, a brain upon which a heavy load seemed to rest, a feeling of vague, undefined trouble, and Cyrus Mumford looked once more upon the scenes of life.

He was not in his library, where he had fainted, but in his own bed-chamber. The first thing he saw was the face of Makepeace Mullin, and its calm composure seemed somehow to rest and ease him.

"Feelin' better, mayor?" he asked, genially. "I don't know," said Mumford. "What's the matter?"

"Oh! you took sick a little, that's all."

"How long have I been here?"

"Three or four hours, squire."

"This position of mayor is too much for an old man like me. It brings a good deal of worry; a younger man should have it. There's Ralston, now—the Strong Arm of Hotspur—he could fill the place like a book."

"He's a good man," said Mullin, cautiously. "Ez Socrates would observe, put him whar ye will an' he's ter ther manner born. That's ther kind Colorado Rube is."

"You are right, Makepeace; and then, if the Buzzards should keep their threat and invade our town—"

He stopped short and a frightened look passed over his face.

"What is it, sir?" the janitor asked.

"Did I dream it, or have the Buzzards been here?" the mayor feverishly asked.

"They've been hyar, but nobody is hurt, an' they hev been driv' away. Ez Socrates used fer ter say, 'They packed up their grip-sack an' stole away.'"

"They stood over me knife in hand, the five minutes were nearly up, they—"

"Yas, yas; I know it was a tryin' period, but you come out on't all right. We bu'st inter ther room an' put them galoots ter flight; ez Socrates would put it, 'They fled like chaff afore ther wild west wind.' Be ca'm, mayor, thar's nothin' ter fear; an' remember ther janitor o' Independence Hall is hyar, an' ready ter bu'st his vest buttons off in yer defense."

The old man put out his trembling hand.

"You are a good friend, Makepeace, but I am all mixed up on the subject. I see I am safe, but tell me all about it."

"Wal, you see it's jest like this: ever sence I've been on duty hyar I've made ther sarcuit o' ther house reg'lar ev'ry half-hour, lookin' arter ther fastenin's, an' I did ther same thing ter-night, ez usual. When I war a-makin' my half-past twelve sarcuit, I noticed suthin' peccoliar. A chair had been moved at least two foot from whar I left it."

"Now, sech an important sarcumstance ez that wa'n't ter be lightly passed over, an' I made up my mind ter investigate. Accordingly I came up ter yer room. Lol ther door was open. I looked in an' see'd ther Buzzards. Wal, mayor, I'm a janitor, an' sech orter be noted fur iron firmness, but I allow I felt a rush o'

blood ter my head. I recognized them an' I recognized ther danger."

"But how was it ter be met? True, I had two pards ter back me, but I knowed they wouldn't feel ekul ter tacklin' a Buzzard on ekul terms, an' thar was no time ter go out an' git help. So I scud fur my two pards. Mayor, may I never sleep ag'in ef they—ther bravest men in town, ez they loved ter call theirselves—didn't wilt like plucked cabbage leaves in a hot sun. They jest did that; their sand left them entirely."

"I told 'em ter foller me ter ther rescue, an' they declined. They said you was a goner, anyhow, an' they wasn't goin' ter chip in, an' git salivated theirselves. In short, they refused ter take ther bull by ther horns, ez Socrates used fer ter say. Then I see'd that all depended on me, an' my soul ariz ekul ter ther emergency. I went up-stairs with a revolver in each hand an' a bowie-knife in my teeth. I was bound ter conquer or die. Your affairs had reached a critical crisis. Bill Buzzard had jest raised his knife ter slash yer, and then you give a leap, a yell, an' tumbled over."

"Then I sailed in. I reckon I war a bit excited, fur my fu'st shot hit ther lamp, instead o' Bill, whom I aimed at, an' sent that a-flyin' in pieces, but I come in heavy on ther up-beat. I yelled like ez though a hull gang was thar under my orders, tellin' Colorado Rube ter take one, Apollo Abe a second an' Buck Buckley a third, an' I blazed away with both revolvers till thar hull business was empty."

"Then I hearked. Not a sound was ter be heard. Whar was ther enemy? I didn't know. I hearked some more. No use; dead silence war 'round an' about me, ez Socrates would put it. I got desp'rit, an' went in fur a second lamp I knowed was in yer room. I lit it. Lol you'n me was ther only parties then thar. Ther Buzzards was gone. My leetle game had worked wal; they thought at least a dozen men was arter them, an' had cleared out on ther dead run. An' thar laid you, unburt."

"Ter cut ther narrytve short, I got ye ter bed an' sent word o' ther state o' affairs ter Rube, an' hyar ye be all right side up with care, an' Colorado Rube is arter ther enemy."

Makepeace Mullin was the hero of Hotspur City. His stock had gone up with a boom, and every one was talking of how he had saved the mayor and put all the Buzzards to flight unaided. It was voted one of the greatest achievements in the history of Hotspur, and so it was.

And Cyrus Mumford did not forget to tell the brave janitor that he thought so, himself.

Ralston and his search-party succeeded no better than usual in trying to find the giant brothers, but it was a hopeless game from the first. With a good start, it was a matter of no trouble for the cunning desperadoes to avoid their pursuers.

When morning came Mumford was neither wholly prostrated bodily nor upset mentally, but he felt the effects of the terrible night a good deal and kept his bed, and there Colorado Rube called upon him.

The latter was a good deal mortified by the recent occurrence. After all the precautions they had taken, it was remarkable that the outlaw brothers could enter the city and attempt to murder the mayor in his own house, but so it was. The two men who had refused to aid Mullin in his attack had seen the probable result of their cowardice and fled from the town, but as they had always been looked upon as among the bravest of the citizens, where were the rulers to look for men who really had the courage to guard their mayor?

The fact remained that, with a very few exceptions, all feared the Buzzards as men are seldom feared.

"Never mind," said Mumford. "I shall not need a guard any longer. This event does not hasten me in carrying out a plan I had already formed. To-day I resign my office!"

"I really wish you wouldn't, sir."

"You have said so before, Ralston, and I know your motive is good, but I am not going to be hunted like a wild beast. An old man is not a fit ruler in such an emergency. A man is needed at the front who will deal with the giant brothers with an iron hand and fear them not. I do fear them, and I am not going to be killed for the sake of an office."

"But, mayor, are you sure you would be any safer if you did resign?"

"What do you mean?"

"Would not the Buzzards continue to hate you as much as before? The mere resigning of your office does not atone for the offense they claim you have committed."

"I shall leave Hotspur at once and go to St. Louis."

"I doubt if even that would save you. The Buzzards are relentless, and they will hate you and me, and seek our lives, until death ends the vendetta. To be frank, I do not think you would help yourself a particle by resigning."

Mumford's face was pale and troubled.

"Then, in Heaven's name, what am I going to do?" he asked.

"Hang on to your office and fight it out."

"Impossible!"

"So far, I admit, the Buzzards have been too much for my searchers, but it has been because they know scores of places among the hills which are unknown to us. But it is only a matter of time when we succeed in driving them out. We have already found several caves they have occupied, and made their return to them unsafe. We will have them yet."

"In what year?"

"The present one" answered Ralston, smiling.

"I doubt it very much."

"Well, it's a hard pull, I confess, but I never give up what I undertake. If I can contrive any way so that you and my wife can be safe, Apollo Abe and I will take the trail together. He is a man of wonderful resources, and I think we will make a good team. Now, will you consent to keep your office one week longer?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

ZETTA AND NEAL.

"ONCE more, I decline," Mumford gravely answered. "It may be I shall not escape one grain of the Buzzards' hatred by resigning, but be that as it may, I cease to be mayor of Hotspur to-day. It is useless to urge me, Ralston, for I am fixed in my resolution."

Colorado Rube knew by his voice that he meant all he said; and he accepted the inevitable.

"Well, it must be as you think best, though I wish it were otherwise."

"Later in the day," the elder man said, "I shall go to Independence Hall and formally abdicate. To-morrow there must be a new election, and you, Ralston, shall succeed me."

"If?"

"Yes."

"Nonsense!"

"There is no nonsense about it. Who is so fit to manage the ship of state in this crisis as the Strong Arm of Hotspur? I have sounded Rousseau on the subject, and know he will not consent to run again; and your election will be almost unanimous."

"But I don't want the place."

"Why not?"

Ralston did not answer at once, but he was thinking that it would give him a prominence which, in view of certain things in his past, he did not covet. John Broderick hated him, and he felt that it would be the first move of that man to send word to Arizona and notify certain people there that Captain Redspur, the ex-road-agent, might be had by journeying to Colorado.

"I am not the man for the office, and I shall decline it," he decisively said. "There are enough good men to fill the chair, and I'll give any one of them my support, but I don't want it; I have enough to look after already."

He was thinking of the stubborn enmity of the Buzzards, of the mysterious disappearance of Colonel Nelson, and other things, and it was not the coyness of a professional politician that influenced him.

Mumford carried out his resolution. When he went to Independence Hall he formally resigned, and all Hotspur soon knew the fact.

"We're fallen on melancholy days," ez Socrates would put it," said Makepeace Mullin, commenting on the subject.

"What's his loss is some other man's gain," said Apollo Abe, who had begun to take a deep interest in local affairs.

"Another extract from Socrates," said Mullin, beaming on the blonde man.

The people at large, however, thought less of Socrates than they did of the new election. Who was to succeed Cyrus Mumford? There was a gravity about their discussion which had not characterized the former election. They felt that at such a critical stage of their affairs they ought not to be torn by dissensions; the matter should be unanimous if possible.

Before they slept that night there were signs which showed which way the wind blew, and the name of Rube Ralston was spoken oftener than any other.

Just before dark Neal Bishop received a note from Zetta, asking him to call at the house. He was more pleased than surprised. Twice he had been the means of saving her from Dave Buzzard, and it was natural she should wish to thank him more elaborately than she had done at the time.

He obeyed the summons, and was soon in the presence of the girl. She had borne her late adventure with the composure of a brave nature, and, he thought, had never before looked so charming.

He was kindly greeted, and, for awhile, conversation was on ordinary local topics, but she had a motive in asking to see him which he had not suspected, and she soon approached the subject.

"Have you seen Miss Fenton to-day?" she asked, abruptly.

"No," he answered, starting a little.

"It was fortunate for her, as well as for me, that you arrived," she added.

He was reluctant to act a hypocritical part, but he saw she was looking at him closely and he tried to answer naturally.

"Where have you known Miss Fenton before?" she continued.

His uneasiness increased.

"How did you get that idea? She and I are strangers."

"Pardon me, Mr. Bishop, but I feel that you are not only old acquaintances, but enemies. I have not been blind, and you both have betrayed yourselves in a dozen trifling particulars, as well as in remarks which you thought I did not overhear. Again, while I was walking home with her, she made observations that betrayed more than she thought. I will tell you frankly, Mr. Bishop, that I do not like her, and that I suspect she gained entrance to Colorado Rube's home by a trick. If you know anything about the matter, I beg that you will speak plainly."

Neal was dumfounded. He had thought it possible for Ralston to penetrate the cheat, but that a young girl like Zetta would do so seemed beyond the range of possibility.

Nevertheless she had, and Neal felt as though he was a castle exposed to a merciless fire and fast crumbling to pieces. He desired her good opinion, and he felt that he would forfeit it by either confession or denial.

"I cannot imagine what has given you this opinion—"

"I have already told you. Trifles light as air, yet convincing to my mind."

"Such things are deceptive."

"They have that tendency, I admit; yet, do you deny that I have judged correctly in this case?"

Bishop moved uneasily. What was he to say?

"I beg that you will not question me on this subject," he finally answered.

"Believe me, I do not do so from any trifling motive. Miss Fenton has taken an important position in the household of one of my dearest friends, and I wish to know if she is worthy of their confidence and esteem."

What could he answer? He dared not speak plainly, for he knew that if he did Broderick would keep his threat and "place a rope about his neck."

"Can you imagine a case where a man would be glad to speak plainly," he desperately asked, "and yet be bound to silence by circumstances he could not defy?"

"Such a thing is possible, but I hope you are not so situated. I am anxious to know the truth. Your course, however, is a confession that you have known Miss Fenton in the past, and that if you were to speak plainly it would not be to her credit."

She spoke gravely, yet kindly, and Neal found himself most unpleasantly situated.

"It seems ungrateful for me to refuse to speak plainly after your kindness to me, yet I am so placed that I cannot do otherwise. It will, however, do you no harm to follow your opinion on the subject, and regard Mildred Fenton as one better kept at a distance than made a warm friend."

Zetta was silent for a moment, and then she gravely replied:

"I cannot, of course, blame you until I know your motive, and I will not. I thank you for being so frank as to confirm, rather than deny, my suspicions, and I will be guided accordingly. Of course, you will not wish to have it known that you have said anything to me on the subject, and I shall respect your wishes. Miss Fenton shall not know I suspect her."

"Believe me, I have no unworthy motive in concealing what I know."

"I so believe you, and, remembering how you have risked your life for me, I am sure you are my friend."

"You can rely on that fact, Miss Willis," he declared, with an emphasis which brought a deeper color to her cheeks.

She then skillfully dropped the subject, which was not again alluded to during the additional half-hour that he remained. He went away feeling that, to his other troubles, the dislike and resentment of Zetta were not added.

He was striding along in an absent-minded way when a man appeared in his path and he looked up and saw Broderick. There was a scowl on the latter's face which boded no good, and he did not lose any time by way of preface.

"So you have been visiting the divine Zetta?" he said, with a sneer.

"I am not aware that it is any of your business whether I have or not," bluntly replied Bishop.

"Well, I'm going to make it my business."

"You had better not."

"Nevertheless, I shall. The fact is, I have a fancy for her, and I don't care to have the future Mrs. Broderick associate with a murderer."

"Be careful!" said Neal, threateningly.

"Of what?"

"Of driving me to the wall. You forget I am no longer the plastic fool who came to Hotspur City to plead with you. I have thrown off your chains, and, whatever may be the result, I intend to be a man from this time," was the sturdy reply.

"You'll be a clod, if you're not careful."

"Draw your revolver if you dare!"

Broderick glared furiously at the man who,

he plainly saw, was no longer his cringing slave, but the look gave place to the old sneer.

"Not until you have seen the fair Zetta become Mrs. John Broderick."

"That will never be."

"Why not?"

"Should I see danger of it, I will tell just who and what you are."

"Have I not said that if you do that I'll put your neck in a noose?" sharply demanded the elder man.

"You have said so, but I defy you. I stand here as your enemy, and if I see one of your schemes likely to succeed, I'll nip it in the bud, let the cost be what it may to me."

"I see I've got to kill you," growled Broderick.

"Begin when you will. I carry a revolver and am ready," steadily answered Bishop.

"You are the prince of fools!"

"And you, the prince of scoundrels!"

The matter was assuming an ominous aspect, for Broderick was losing his temper, but at that moment several other men approached, and he forced a laugh and turned away with the remark:

"Crow while you can, my bantam, but Zetta shall be my wife though we are married over your grave!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE NEW MAYOR OF HOTSPUR.

THE following morning the miners and citizens in general arose with the idea that a grave duty lay before them. Cyrus Mumford had resigned his position as mayor, and his successor was to be chosen.

On the previous occasion there had been all the excitement and canvassing which marks an Eastern election, but on this occasion there was none of it. People felt that the situation was too grave for mere wire-pulling. Harmony, a speedy election and a man of nerve at the front, were things imperatively demanded.

Up to that morning only one name had been seriously mentioned, and that was Rube Ralston's. It was the general opinion that if he was elected there would be a firmness and judgment at the front not before shown, and that he would take prompt measures to rid the city of its scourges—the Buzzard brothers.

Despite the common fear entertained for them, a spirit of resistance was beginning to make itself felt, and it was generally agreed that a place which aspired to rival Leavenworth ought not to sit tamely and let three men prey upon them.

Active measures against the giant brothers were on all sides demanded.

At ten o'clock the people began to gather at Independence Hall for the casting of their votes. Colorado Rube was among those who went to the place, but he had taken no part in any preliminaries. On second thought he had decided to let the people deal with him as they would. If they chose him for Mumford's successor he would not decline its office.

He did not know that Mumford, Apollo Abe, Mullin and others, had been working quietly for him, and meeting with universal sympathy.

Without any opening speeches the voting commenced, and as the population was not large, it was soon finished.

Mumford had named Alpheus Nicholson and Wallace Robbins to help him count the ballots, and in a clear voice he announced the result.

Out of one hundred and forty-three votes, Reuben Ralston had received a hundred and thirty-two.

The result was received with prolonged cheering, and Colorado Rube saw that he was indeed called upon to bear the greatest honor the city could give him. Ex-Mayor Mumford's face wore the first genuine smile which had been seen on it since the night of his own troubled inauguration.

Ralston made a speech and then Mumford stepped to the front.

"Fellow-citizens," he said, "I believe that you will agree with me when I say that we have the best mayor of which any Colorado city can boast, and I am sure Hotspur City is about to enter on a career of renewed prosperity. I have, however, one suggestion to make. We do not want to run the risk of a repetition of the scenes which attended a former inauguration, and I move that the oath of office be at once administered."

It was rushing matters a good deal, but the idea pleased the miners, and it was cheered to the echo.

Preparations were promptly made, the Reverend Mr. Wolff again appeared, and in a few minutes Reuben Ralston was mayor of Hotspur as fully as any ceremony could make him.

"I have one thing more to say to you before we disperse," he then said, to the citizens. "The most important duty we have on hand is to deal successfully with the Buzzard brothers. I am in favor of vigorous measures. They are unscrupulous and revengeful, and, so long as we play with them, we shall be in constant danger. Now, this is my proposal: I suggest that, for a short space of time, we give up all other pursuits except hunting them, and leave no stone unturned to accomplish our object. We

must have a regular military organization, and' at the earliest possible moment, march against them in force."

The idea pleased the miners, and they said so with an emphasis not to be mistaken. All felt that they made no mistake when they chose him to stand at the head of affairs.

The military organization was at once begun, and Rube placed his most trusted assistants, including Apollo Abe and Makepeace Mullin, in responsible positions. When next they moved he intended to make sure work of it.

Broderick watched proceedings until after the taking of the oath of office, and then made his way to a point near Ralston's house. He was fortunate enough to see Mildred and be able to motion to her, and she soon joined him in the group of trees before mentioned.

"What now?" she abruptly asked.

"You're as sharp as vinegar," he surlily answered.

"I know there is ill news by your expression. What is it?"

"Ralston is elected mayor."

"I expected it."

"So did I, but it has aroused me to action. I have made a few allies here, and I am going to make them useful. I have already sent one to Arizona."

"Ah!"

"Yes. Ralston is too strong for us to buck against alone, and we must have the Vigilantes to help us. It will be a joyful day to them when they once more see Captain Redspur, and these deluded fools here will take a tumble when they know of what clay their idol is made."

"I have a presentiment that he will foil them."

"Foil the Vigilantes? Not much!"

"He did so in Arizona."

"Luck was with him, and he is a slippery customer; I am ready to acknowledge that; but they have had their lesson, and will give him no chance again."

"Well, if you have adopted that plan, my usefulness here is ended, and I may as well leave."

"Are you afraid?"

"Call it what you will, but the eyes of Colorado Rube trouble me. I suspect that he has penetrated the fiction under which I am working, and only awaits the proper time to say so."

"How can he have done that? Nelson is dead—"

"Oh, of course he has no proof, but when such a long-headed fellow gets a suspicion, he is likely to go on to proof. He would make it warm for me if he knew all, for he might suspect that the disappearance of Nelson was blamable to me."

"Never fear; a few more days will settle it. I want you to remain a short time, for I have a plan of abducting Ralston's wife. It would be a rare revenge to have her missing, and he in deep despair, just as the Arizona Vigilantes seized and hurried him away."

"How can I help you?"

"By admitting us to the house. I have several men who will follow where I lead, for money, and you must hold yourself in readiness to open the doors. Perhaps we may apply tonight—who knows?"

"We are playing a risky game," said Mildred, in a tone of dissatisfaction.

"Is it our first?"

"No; but luck never went so against us before."

"I'll never give up until I have my revenge. Words can't express how I hate Ralston, and I'll follow him to the bitter end. Do you think I can tamely stand the beating he gave me at the Old Rye Hotel? Had I been a dog he could not have used me worse. Well, it's a long road that has no turning."

"Better shoot him and have it over."

"I have repeatedly told you that would be a tame revenge. What I want is to see him writhe with mental pain. He's brave enough; I admit that; and death would be a small calamity, but I will strike him through his wife. I bide my time, and I can be as patient as a red Indian."

There was more fact than fiction in what he said. He did, indeed, keep his hot temper under remarkable control, as he moved on toward the great object of his life.

It was night and the greater part of the people of Hotspur were wrapped in slumber.

Around the village guards paced slowly, as policemen patrol larger cities, but in this case the men had but one object—to see that the Buzzards did not enter the village.

Had all been as keen-eyed as Colorado Rube and Apollo Abe, it might have been impossible to get past them, but three men who crouched in the shadow of the rocks outside the picket line did not seem to think the task impossible, as it was.

They watched their chance, and then one of the trio, fitted past. He was a man of large size, but he moved so quickly that he had time to cross the line and drop in the shadow of a cabin before the guard again faced about.

Another turn and a second man glided past as the first had done; a third, and the last of the three was by the cabin wall.

The Buzzards were once more in Hotspur.

Having gone so far their subsequent progress was even less difficult, and they walked toward the heart of the village with a careless swagger, though not one failed to use his eyes to good advantage.

"This night settles it," said Bill. "We're only three, an' now that Ralston is at ther head o' affairs thar'll be a change in ther programme. We've got ter make a bold push or lose ther hull game. Ef we kin do our work ter-night, we'll skip out an' leave this section forever. I hate ter leave ther Roost, but arter ther way matters has gone, thar ain't no help fur it."

"What do we keer fur Sugar-Loaf ef we kin get revenge on 'em?" Jack asked.

"Revenge is ther main p'int."

"Ay."

"You don't say something, Dave," added Bill, turning to the youngest brother.

"Leave me alone; I am hyer ter act," Dave moodily replied.

He was thinking of Zetta; he was always thinking of her. He had abandoned the opinion that it was a proof of weakness to care for a woman. All he desired was to win her, but that meant the surmounting of so many obstacles that he grew morose and ugly when he thought of it; and, despite all his bravado, the thought would come to him that if he had followed the advice of Mona, instead of the evil example of his brothers, he might have been in position to seek her affection like a man.

It was a bitter reflection.

"So we're all hyer ter act," answered Bill, "an' we'll begin right away. Hotspur shall be a graveyard!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AT BAY.

"FIRE! fire! fire!"

The cry, always one of terror, sounded on the night, and accompanied by the clanging of Hotspur's one bell, penetrated the slumbers of the tired people, and brought them out of their couches.

When they hastened to the window and looked out they saw a red light shooting up against the sky, and the continued ringing of the bell showed them they were needed.

Nearly all Hotspur turned out.

It did not take the people long to discover that the fire was at work on their cherished "temple of justice"—Independence Hall—and dismay seized upon them. Their facilities for subduing it were not good, for they had no sort of fire-engine, and the water supply was by no means large.

Mayor Ralston was somewhat late on the scene, for he had at last settled down to one night of needed rest, and gone so far into Dreamland that it was hard to get back; but when he came striding into the group the whole scene changed. One glance showed him the people had in nearly every case brought pails, and he knew there was but one way to make use of them.

"Form a line to the spring and pass the water from hand to hand," he ordered. "I'll remain here and take charge. Lose no time!"

The men hastened to obey, while he surveyed the burning building with a critical eye. He was from the first convinced that it was doomed, but it would never do to give up what had been Hotspur's pride without a struggle. The door was forced open, and as the water commenced to arrive the battle began in earnest.

Colorado Rube was the most active man of all. He had cast off his coat, and, unincumbered by anything, took the hottest post and went to work.

From that time it was a desperate fight against odds. Water was poured on as fast as possible, but it was wholly inadequate to the requirements of the occasion.

As the flames increased and the light grew stronger, a placard was discovered pasted on the side of an adjacent cabin, where the light fell full upon it, and in the midst of a white sheet were seen these words:

"COMPLIMENTS O' BUZZARD BROTHERS."

The paper had hardly been needed, for the clearer-headed of the citizens had surmised the truth before, but it aroused them to a fury which would have vented itself to the giants' injury had they then appeared on the scene.

As the battle against the flames went on, each inch of Independence Hall that the heat had not rendered too terribly hot for occupancy had a man at work. The ridge-pole was lined by workers who sat astride and used the buckets passed along to them with what effect they could, and among this line was Mayor Ralston.

Another of the crowd was John Broderick. Just why he was there was not clear, for he would gladly have seen the whole village in ashes, but he had caught the infectious excitement and was to be seen doing his share, though it now and then occurred to him that he was a fool.

The circumstances of the case finally suggested a fiendish idea to him, however.

Ralston was working where few men dared go, and in a place he must himself soon abandon. At his left the fire had eaten a hole through the roof, and there was such danger that the whole top would fall in that many brave men began to retreat to the ground.

But, in the most exposed place, the mayor kept his position and flung down the water, while smoke curled so thickly around him he could scarcely breathe.

It had occurred to Broderick that he might possibly throw the brave man from his position into the blazing pit beneath.

For awhile there was no chance, for other men were too near, but as the heat became more intense, those who were nearest Rube retreated and there was no one to pass the buckets of water to him.

Broderick's opportunity had arrived.

He moved along the roof until he was beside his intended victim and passed the bucket along without a word. Rube's back was toward him, and he did not know there had been a change of assistants.

Broderick's eyes blazed with excitement. He would never have another chance like that. The curling smoke hid them from the view of all others; whatever tragedy took place there would have no witnesses save the participants.

Reaching down he grasped the unsuspecting man in a hold to which his excitement gave unnatural power.

"The hour has come!" he hissed. "Ralston, you're going into the fire below, and when you're roasting it'll be a pleasure to know I sent you. Down, down—"

He had spoken thus far, dallying with his victim because he believed that, with the advantage of hold he had obtained, there was no danger of defeat, but, very much to his surprise, the Strong Arm of Hotspur arose like a lion shaking off a pigmy's grasp.

"Not yet!" was the stern reply; and then the tables were turned with a startling quickness and Broderick found himself in the clutch of his master.

Under an exterior of unwavering coolness surged a fierce indignation in Ralston's breast, and though he would not give his enemy to the fate he had so narrowly escaped, he resolved to fling him from the opposite side of the building.

A muffled cry came from the villain's lips; the heat was intense, the smoke choking, and he feared the fate he knew he deserved.

There was no one to interfere.

As Broderick was raised in Colorado Rube's strong arms he caught desperately at the chimney. This saved him for a moment, and as one of the bricks loosened in his grasp, the energy of despair gave him fresh courage.

Chance had furnished him a weapon.

Tearing away a brick he struck out with all his force, and as the novel weapon struck its victim's head, Colorado Rube loosened his hold, reeled and fell from the roof.

He went shooting rapidly down the sloping roof, while Broderick sunk nearly fainting on his knees. The smoke and flames were unendurable, and he felt the building shake beneath him.

Life was at stake, and he summoned all his resolution, gained his feet and staggered out among the other men. He would have fallen had they not caught him.

"Where is Ralston?" one of them demanded.

"Overcome by the smoke!" he gasped. "He fell from the roof."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes—down there. Take me away."

Broderick spoke gaspingly. Just then his head was whirling and he could not think coherently. He thought only of getting away from that place of horror.

None of the others were disposed to stay. They saw that Independence Hall was doomed, and that to remain there longer was to fall in with the roof. They retreated to the ladders, and from there to the ground, carrying Broderick with them. Before they reached the ground he was unconscious.

When he recovered, he was dripping with the water they had flung upon him, but his head was clear, and he felt well enough bodily except that the smoke was on his lungs.

His first thought was of the struggle on the house-top, and he wondered if Ralston had already betrayed him.

"You're all right, pard," said a kind miner. "I only wish I could say as much for the mayor."

"Is he dead?" asked Broderick quickly.

"I dunno. He has been carried home unconscious. He come shootin' off ther ruff like a cannon-ball, an' when we picked him up he didn't stir. We hope he'll pull through, but we dunno."

Broderick stood in irresolution. If Ralston never regained consciousness, he was safe; if he did come around, he would reveal all. What was to be done? The plotter looked at the blazing building for a moment dully. Independence Hall was near its end. The fight had ceased. The best fire-brigade in the country could not have saved it then.

Suddenly Broderick came to a decision. "I'll go to Ralston's!" he muttered. "This night is the turning-point of the game. I will see how he is, and either end all by one well-directed shot, or abduct his wife, flee from this vicinity and leave him to his solitude."

He started rapidly away, resolved to execute his evil purpose.

Colorado Rube lay upon his bed, white and insensible. Whether it was the blow from the brick, or the succeeding fall, he had received an injury to his head which occasioned the doctor grave fears. Until he recovered little could be told, but the man of medicine had decided that, while there was no fracture of the skull, there was room for belief that there was an injury to the brain.

He remained at the house until news came that another man had been injured, and that he was needed to set a broken arm, and then he hurried away, after telling Mrs. Ralston that his presence just then would do Rube no good, but that he would return in a short time.

Mrs. Ralston was left alone with her husband, for Mildred had gone out, presumably to witness the fire.

It was a trying period in the little woman's life, but all her heroism came to the front and she did not once give way to her feelings. She was as sincerely affected as any one could be, but she realized that then, if ever, was the time for her to show firmness and be of use, and she crushed back the sobs which strove for mastery and worked zealously.

The pause was an ominous and gloomy one. She had no one to keep her company, no one to speak encouragement. The heavy breathing of the unconscious man and the ticking of the clock were all that broke the silence.

Well for her had nothing else occurred to break that pause in events.

It was a footfall behind her which caused her to turn her head. She looked with eagerness, hoping the doctor had returned, though that seemed hardly possible, but what she saw caused her to leap to her feet.

The Buzzard brothers were in the room!

At any time their coming would have been ominous, but on this occasion the effect of the ferocious expression of their faces was heightened by the fact that each man held a drawn knife in his hand, and she did not need to be told what the visit foreboded.

They had come to murder Colorado Rube!

The color retreated from her face, and she stood like a statue, but Bill Buzzard's relentless voice broke the silence.

"Not a word, woman," he said. "We ain't goin' ter harm ye ef you are sensible, but we won't stand no nonsense. Utter one cry an' I'll forget ye are my sister an' use this!"

He held up the glittering knife.

"Why are you here?" gasped Mrs. Ralston.

"Hal hal! Now ye hit ther nail on ther head. Why be we hyar? Woman, we're hyar fur vengeance on a sneakin' cur that ain't fit furter live. We're hyar ter kill Rube Ralston!"

"You shall only reach him by passing over my dead body!" exclaimed the desperate wife.

"We ain't pertic'lar what we tread on, but mebbe you hev a choice in the matter. I swar that ef ye don't stand aside you shall suffer ez wal ez him."

"I will not stand aside; he is my husband and I will defend him to the last. Cowards and villains, who dare not attack Colorado Rube when he is conscious, you shall not reach him now until you have conquered his wife!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A DESOLATE HOME.

BILL BUZZARD laughed mockingly.

"Bah!" he exclaimed. "Do ye think you'll be an obstacle? I'll take ye with one hand an' chuck ye out o' ther way."

He advanced a step, but her voice rung out sharply.

"Stop!"

There was something about it, he could not tell what, that caused him to obey, and he stood looking at her stupidly.

On her part, her mind was growing clearer, and she was trying to think of every possible means of averting the impending doom. She had no weapon within reach except a small knife, and that was illy-calculated to stay the advance of three giants, and though she was resolved to use it to do what execution she could, if driven to that point, she realized the vital importance of delay.

If she could keep the assassins at bay until help came, all might yet be well.

"Is this the way brothers should advance upon a sister?" she demanded. "Are drawn knives a sign of fraternal feeling?"

"They're a sign we're in dead 'arnest," said Bill, practically. "You needn't prate about ther brother an' sister part, fur thet's all gone. You saw fit ter cast us off an' take up with Rube Ralston, an' as he's our enemy, you're our enemy, too. Leave yer soft words out; they won't tech us."

"David," continued the little woman, "are you, too, merciless? Have you forgotten—"

"I ain't nothin' ter say," the youngest brother answered, but his gaze avoided hers. "You've chose yer path, an' you must walk it. Bill takes ther lead hyar."

"So I do," Bill said, with a start, "an' I'll be about it. I see yer game; ye're tryin' ter delay ther business until help comes. It won't work. Boyees, advance an' finish ther job!"

Once more the giants pressed forward, and their keen knives glittered in the lamp-light in an ominous way. There was no pity in their hearts; they had resolved to murder Colorado Rube, and they would do the deed in the presence of the wife and sister.

But she drew from her pocket a leather case, and, casting it aside, stood with a knife in her own hand.

"Back!" she exclaimed. "I swear by all that is sacred that if you come near me I will strike you to my feet!"

Again Bill Buzzard paused. There were few men who could have checked his advance at that moment, but in the dauntless courage of the little woman he recognized a part of the determined spirit which marked his own nature, and the pause was made against his will.

"Drop that plaything!" he ordered, harshly. "I will not! Cowards that you are, you shall not touch my husband while I live."

"Do you think you can check us? Never! If you persist in this madness you will only add yerself ter our vengeance. You are a poor, misguided critter, an' we would spar' you ter repent ther hour you followed Rube Ralston, but don't press us too much. Git out o' ther way, or yer life is forfeit!"

"You cannot frighten me. You are three men and I only a woman, but I am here in defense of my unconscious husband and the fact will give me more than woman's strength. Beware, Bill Buzzard, for I am not to be frightened!"

A curse fell from the desperado's lips. He wondered afterward why he paused, but at that moment he was not a creature of his own will. As the bird charmed by the serpent obeys a power it cannot resist or understand, so the giant of Buzzard's Roost yielded to a degree to a nobler influence, and hesitated before the brave wife as he would have done before no man in Hotspur City.

It was a thrilling scene. One woman, strong in the power of right, was holding three men at bay.

One at least of the giant brothers was ashamed of his presence there. Dave longed to throw down his knife and abandon the vendetta, but his pride would not allow him to retreat from a position once taken.

He could not, however, meet Mona's accusing gaze.

"This sort o' thing won't do," said Bill, furiously, as he tried to overawe Mrs. Ralston with a look. "You're playin' with a tiger—with three tigers. Beware! Ef ye fool with us fuder, it'll be ther wuss for you. Drop that knife—drop it, I say!"

His voice arose to a pitch which was intended to make the last atom of courage desert her, but though she was very pale she did not waver perceptibly.

"I will not drop it, and I again warn you to keep away. Your hatred for my husband has no just grounds. What was it to you that I married him? Wasn't that my right? Have I ever interfered to say whom you should, and whom you should not, care for? No; you have been free, and so will I be free. Go back to the Roost and leave me alone!"

"Go back ter ther Roost! We can't wal do that. Ther man-hunters sent out by Ralston, ther Mayor o' Hotspur, hev driven us from thar. We are hunted like wolves, by his orders. Ther only safety for us lies miles away, an' we're goin'. But, afore we go, he dies. Woman, git out o' ther way!"

Again Bill pressed forward, and Mona saw that the decisive moment was at hand. An arousing on Bill's part told that it could be delayed no longer. She wondered that she had kept them at bay so long. She must now fight for her life and that of her husband.

A moment more and her voice sharply sounded through and beyond the room.

"Help! help! Hotspur to the rescue! HELP!" She did not expect any one to respond, but, since the collision must come, it was well to do all she could to help in the good cause.

A furious oath fell from Bill's lips, and he bounded forward like a veritable tiger, but at that moment there was a crash of glass and a man came through the window like a rocket projected from some unknown quarter.

The interruption dazed the leading giant a little, and in another moment he received a blow under the chin which almost lifted him clear of his feet, and then dropped him at the feet of his brothers.

Then Jack and Dave stood looking into the muzzles of two leveled revolvers.

"Hands up! I'm in the game, and I'll shoot dead the first man who tries to draw. Hands up!"

It was the voice of Apollo Abe, and he stood in front of Mrs. Ralston like a rock of defense. That he felt equal to the demands of the occa-

sion was clear, for his voice was that of a master and his bold face had never been more firm and commanding.

Despite the warning, the hands of Jack and Dave were about to move toward their weapons; but just as Bill staggered to his feet they heard other sounds—the pattering of feet and murmur of voices—which told a tale not to be disregarded. Apollo Abe had not come alone.

"Death!" gasped Bill Buzzard, hotly; but Jack caught him by the arm and whispered something, while at the same moment another head appeared at the window where Abe had entered.

Bill Buzzard was not a fool. He was anxious for revenge, but he knew that to begin a fight then would be to soon have all Hotspur against him, while as for getting at Rube Ralston, Apollo Abe stood in the way with at least two lives at his mercy.

"Retreat!"

Bill spoke the single word, and the giant brothers turned.

Apollo Abe's fingers worked nervously about the triggers of his revolvers, but Mrs. Ralston sprung in front of him.

"Do not fire!" she exclaimed. "Capture them if you will, but do them no harm."

The chance and the Buzzards were gone while she spoke. They darted through an open door, just as a dozen of the honest miners surged into the room.

"Whar are they?" cried the foremost; "whar are ther Buzzards?"

"This way," said Apollo Abe, quick to take advantage of this flickering courage. "They've taken the alarm and fled, but we'll have them yet. Follow me!"

And he darted after the fugitives, closely followed by the miners. It was a most unfortunate move, and, looking at it afterward, he wondered that he was so blind as to leave Mrs. Ralston alone, after the warning he had received that danger was abroad in Hotspur.

But she believed herself saved and the danger over, and her overtaxed nerves gave way. She dropped upon her knees beside her husband's bed, and her head fell upon her clasped hands.

"Thank Heaven!" she murmured; "he is saved, he is saved!"

There was no reply. Colorado Rube lay motionless, breathing heavily, and a pause ensued with only the ticking of the clock to break the silence.

But though her rescuers had gone other eyes were upon her, and a man who wore a rude mask, hastily constructed by his own hands, turned to two burly fellows who accompanied him.

"Now is the time," he said, in a cautious whisper. "Go in and seize her while she isn't looking. I'll follow close behind."

Those to whom he spoke needed no urging; they glided cautiously through the door and into the room.

Mrs. Ralston did not hear them.

Supposing all danger past, she was expressing her gratitude to a Power that had watched over her in her hour of adversity, and she was as weak then as any pampered daughter of civilization.

Her first warning came when a hand was laid upon her shoulder, but she turned slowly, unsuspecting of danger. What she saw was not calculated to increase her feeling of safety, however. Beside her were two men she recognized as among the worst in Hotspur, while the fact that the third wore a mask was enough to create fresh alarm.

She made a movement toward the knife which she had dropped, but one of the roughs seized her in his arms.

"That's right," said the masked man. "Give her no chance to play with us as she did with them. Take her from the room!"

"Who are you?" cried Mona, in alarm. "What do you mean by this assault? Release me, I command you!"

"Your commands count for but little in this case," was the cold reply. "Take her away at once. Apollo Abe is liable to return, and that means death to you. Away!"

They began dragging her away. She tried to cry out for help, but one of the men clasped his hand over her mouth and the cry was prevented.

She was borne struggling from the room by the minor ruffians, while the masked leader paused and looked upon the unconscious mayor. His face moved in a dark smile, and his hand, moving toward his belt, half drew a knife, but he thrust it back with a sudden movement.

"No!" he said. "That would be but a poor vengeance. He must live, if he will; live to know that his wife is gone; live to find himself alone and desolate. Fate is at last playing into my hands, and Captain Redspur shall suffer all that man can suffer!"

It was no safe place for him to linger, and he hurried after his tools. They had carried their prisoner to the trees back of the house, and from there the entire party beat a retreat toward the wild country around Bull's-Head.

When half a mile had been traveled, the

leader ordered a halt and Mrs. Ralston's mouth was freed from the hold of the abductor's hand. "You will now be allowed more liberty, madam," said the leader, "and you need fear no immediate harm, but I warn you not to indulge in any act of hostility. We mean business, and a woman's whims are not going to interfere with my plans. Possibly you do not recognize me, but I have the honor to announce that my name is John Broderick!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

BRODERICK'S PROPOSAL.

THE pursuit of the Buzzard brothers did not result in any known good or harm. With the start they had secured the pursuit was a hopeless one from the first, for no one was more at home among the rocks which surrounded Hotspur than they.

Both parties fired a few shots, but in the darkness all went wild.

Apollo Abe would have kept on in pursuit—alone, since he saw that his followers, though brave and in earnest, were not equal to the demands of the occasion—but he remembered that Mrs. Ralston was alone.

So he abandoned the pursuit and turned back toward the cabin.

It had not become generally known that the Buzzards had actually invaded the village, and the greater part of the men were to be seen standing around the ruins of Independence Hall. The roof had fallen in, and only desolation now remained of what had once been the pride of the city.

Hotspur was at last fully aroused. On the cabin near at hand shone the placard which told them to whom they owed the vandal act, and from the words which passed from one miner to another, it was plain they would bear no more from the outlaws of Buzzard's Roost. Desperate men and hard fighters they might be, but the blood of Hotspur was at last up.

Apollo Abe entered Ralston's house and went at once to the mayor's room. Colorado Rube still lay upon the bed, and did not seem to have stirred since he left, but Mrs. Ralston was not visible. This surprised him a good deal, and he was about to search for her when the doctor returned.

The latter had received no information of the exciting scenes which had occurred there, and he walked at once to his patient.

"Better!" he tersely exclaimed.

"Is there hope?" Apollo Abe quickly asked.

"I'll agree to have him nominally conscious in a short time, but whether his mind will be right or not is another question. The great fear is that there has been an injury to the brain."

"It is a terrible night!" muttered Abe.

"You may well say so."

The doctor had brought his medicine-case, and he at once went to work again. He appreciated the honor of having the mayor of the city as a patient, and he intended to bring him out of his difficulty if zealous work would do it.

Just then Mildred and Zetta came in together. The former had seen Broderick after he announced his intention of abducting Mrs. Ralston that night, and from that time she forced her company upon Zetta so persistently that she could not be shaken off. She was resolved that, in case any suspicion arose, she would be able to prove an *alibi*.

"Where is Mrs. Ralston?" Apollo Abe at once demanded when he saw Zetta.

"Isn't she here?"

"No, she is not in the house. Can she have gone for help?"

Abe knit his forehead into a series of wrinkles.

"Probably so," Zetta answered, in a matter-of-fact way, for she knew nothing of the Buzzards' visit.

"It is impossible!" said Abe, harshly. "This must be looked into."

He strode abruptly from the room—but where was he to look for the missing woman? Even then he suspected a mystery in the case. He was sure the Buzzards had not returned, and equally sure harm had come to the mayor's wife—she would not otherwise have left him at such a crisis—but what was the explanation of the matter?

He found his late assistants, and bade them search for her, while he himself strode away on another mission he had in his mind.

Aided by Zetta and Mildred, both of whom seemed very anxious to help, the doctor continued work on Colorado Rube, and in a comparatively short time had the satisfaction of seeing him open his eyes.

When addressed he did not at first make any reply, but his head cleared gradually.

"I've had an accident, I see," he said slowly. "I was at the fire and fell from the roof. Was Independence Hall burned?"

"To the ground," the doctor answered; "but that's a small matter since you are alive and well."

"I'm not sure I am well," Rube dubiously answered. "There is a feeling about my head I don't like. What was it happened at the fire?"

"You fell from the roof."

"I don't mean that. There was something went before. I remember being on the roof, and fighting the flames, and then—and then—"

He paused for a moment, and then slowly added:

"There was something else happened—something unpleasant, but I can't place it."

"I wouldn't try now. Give yourself a rest."

"Where is Mona?"

"Gone out for a short time. She will soon return. See! Here are Misses Willis and Fenton."

Zetta came forward and spoke gently to him, but Mildred dared not venture. Her idea that he suspected her evil nature had not vanished, and she feared that, in his present condition, he would speak plainly.

He soon fell asleep, and the worthy doctor nodded in a satisfied way.

"He will come out of it all right. It was a severe shock, both physically and mentally, and his head does not clear at once, but I'll guarantee he will be all right in a day or two."

One cause for worry was thus removed from the minds of his friends, but they had something more which was not so easily made right. No trace had been found of Mrs. Ralston. Careful search had shown that she was not in the village, and all save Apollo Abe felt sure she was in the hands of the Buzzards. Abe did not know what to think, but he was doing his best to gain a clue.

Zetta and Mildred were forced to become associates in caring for Colorado Rube, much to the former's dissatisfaction. She was fully convinced that Mildred was an enemy in the mayor's household, but how was she to prove it?

Neal Bishop was not to be found in the village, and it was doubtful if he would speak, anyway.

There was no rest in Ralston's house that night.

Morning was fast advancing when Zetta, who had temporarily withdrawn to the sitting-room, heard a rap at the door. She cautiously answered it, and Broderick entered. He looked cool and self-possessed, but, after greeting her, inquired for Ralston with what she thought real solicitude.

She told all that had occurred, and the plotter learned, by skillful questioning, that the part he had taken in Rube's accident had not been made known, owing to the injured man's mental condition.

"Do you know that the pity you are expressing for him is misplaced," he abruptly said, when sure of the ground beneath his feet.

"What do you mean?" indignantly demanded Zetta.

"Bear patiently with me until I explain. What do you know of Ralston's past life?"

"Before he came to Hotspur?"

"Yes."

"I did not know him before he came here."

"And I dare say he has never gone very deep into particulars, either, has he?"

"No. I don't know; I never thought of it before."

"Miss Willis, it is my painful duty to give you light on a subject where light must ultimately come. I repeat, it is a painful duty, for there are sad features about it, though no pity can be given Colorado Rube."

Broderick spoke in his most pathetic way, but Zetta was so little affected in the direction that he would have had her affected, that she replied, still with indignation:

"I am sure, sir, you know nothing not creditable to Mr. Ralston."

"You shall hear, Miss Willis. Some years ago there flourished in Arizona a noted road-agent called Captain Redspur, who was also called the Fiend of the Trail. I could tell you numerous incidents to show how he won the *sobriquet*, and to show how utterly merciless he was; but I am free to admit that it is probable many of the stories were exaggerations. Enough to say he was a road-agent, unscrupulous, feared, hated."

"Finally, he was captured, though not without a hard struggle, in which he was wounded. The miners were wild for satisfaction, and they went about taking it. How Redspur foiled and escaped them you would not care to hear. Let me trace his subsequent career."

"I, as an honest citizen, was sent to hunt for him. It was a year later when I arrived here, but when I saw the so-called Rube Ralston, my work took a great stride. In him I recognized the man for whom I searched, and I solemnly declare that Ralston and Redspur are one!"

"I do not believe it!" cried Zetta.

"Proof is easily had—or lost. When Redspur was captured he received a wound on his left arm, midway between his wrist and elbow; a wound at least five inches long. If Ralston is he, the scar must still be there, and as he is sleeping, there is nothing to hinder you from investigating. I am willing to abide by the result, but I tell you fairly that I know Captain Redspur's face well, and I have made no mistake."

There was a brief silence, during which Zetta looked keenly at the dark face before her.

"You say you were sent by the Arizona peo-

ple to search for Captain Redspur. With what object?"

"To bring him to justice, Miss Willis," was the grave reply.

"In his case, 'justice' means—"

"Death!"

"Do you still persist in your purpose?"

"I must do my duty, Miss Willis."

Zetta shivered. For long weeks she had been a frequent visitor at the Ralston cottage. She had loved Mona like a sister; she had highly esteemed Rube; she had regarded their home as a very happy one. Must it, indeed, be broken up?

She asked the question of Broderick with a trembling voice, and he could hardly conceal the joy it gave him.

"Miss Willis, my duty is plain, but it cuts me to the heart to do aught against those who are your friends. I value your good opinion above all other earthly things, for, Miss Willis, I frankly confess that I love you. This is a poor time for such a confession, but I am driven to it, and if you ask in earnest I may not be able to refuse to spare Ralston."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CAVE OF DEATH.

BRODERICK had spoken so rapidly that Zetta did not at first realize the full meaning of his words, and she quickly replied:

"It is not for myself I ask you to spare him, but for the sake of his wife. It seems impossible that he can be the road-agent captain, but if it is so, I can assure you it will be her death-blow. She loves him devotedly."

"If you will love me like that," murmured Broderick, trying to assume the pathos of a stage lover, "Ralston is saved!"

This time there could be no doubt as to his meaning, and a frightened look crossed her face. Her first opinion of the dark-faced stranger had never changed, and his love was about as welcome as a serpent's touch.

"It is not about me we are talking," she said, quickly.

"Indeed, it is about you, fair Zetta. It is about you I constantly think; it is you I love. Miss Willis, I beg that you will not reject my offer. I would make you my wife, and, as such, I would do all in my power to make you happy!"

His voice was earnest; too earnest by far, for a light crept into his eyes which was positively wild, and plainly revealed the fact that his was a fierce passion which carried danger with it as the flood carries *debris* which speaks of wrecks by the way.

"I—I thank you for your implied good opinion of me," said Zetta, hurriedly, "but I must decline the honor. I do not care for you and—"

"You may learn to do so."

"Impossible!"

"Think again. Consent to regard me as your suitor and I will save Ralston from the Arizona lynchmen and his wife from a broken heart."

"You have no right to make such a condition," said the girl, indignantly.

"I merely suggest a fair bargain. Perhaps it partakes too much of a commercial transaction, but I am a man past the froth and foam of youth. I want you for my wife, and I tell you plainly what I will do if you consent. The life of Ralston, and the happiness of his wife, are in my hands. Consent to marry me, and the lynchmen shall be cheated of their prey."

"And if I refuse?"

"I must do my duty."

"Your duty!" replied Zetta, scornfully. "You show just how highly you regard what you call duty. Is it honorable, or manly, to try to compel me to marry you by such means? You have shown your real nature, sir, and you merit all a true woman's contempt."

She was half-frightened at her own plain speaking, but his dark face showed no anger and he bowed deeply.

"It shall be as you say. Ralston shall hang!" was his even reply.

"I do not believe he is the road-agent captain."

"And I solemnly swear he is. You have only to go to his bedside, uncover his arm and look for the scar to satisfy yourself. The lynchmen will not need that evidence. Redspur's face is well known to them, and when they see Ralston they will say! 'Here is our man!' Then they will hang him!"

Zetta shivered.

"You are a demon!" she exclaimed.

"It is for you to say whether I shall be a demon or a tender lover, and, according as you decide, Colorado Rube lives or dies by the rope."

"I will not listen to you longer!" cried Zetta, springing up. "Your words are an insult to common-sense."

"Your meaning is a trifle vague, but once more, and for the last time, I say: Will you save Ralston from Judge Lynch, and his wife from a broken heart; will you be my wife?"

He had folded his arms and was looking at her for a reply from under knit brows, his expression more befitting a pirate chief than a lover.

"Never!" she cried, quickly

"That settles it, and I'll bid you good-day. Don't complain if, when I see you again, it is too late to retract your rash decision."

He turned slowly away, to give her time to speak, but as she said nothing he was obliged to go in earnest. She closed and locked the door, and then sat down to reflect upon this strange interview.

She was at first filled with dismay, but maturer thought almost convinced her that all Broderick had said had been a fiction. Surely, Colorado Rube was not the man to be an ex-road-agent.

"I will not believe it!" she said, energetically.

Still, her thoughts hung pertinaciously on the subject, and she finally arose and softly entered the mayor's room. He had been left alone with an open door so that any movement on his part would be heard.

He lay sleeping peacefully, with his arms lying on the bed-spread, and the chance to test one of Broderick's assertions was in his power. She moved forward, and then carefully pushed back his sleeve from his muscular arm.

She could not avoid a start as she did so. There, midway between wrist and elbow, she saw a long, white scar, plainly the result of a bad knife-wound.

Zetta dropped into a chair, dismayed and trembling.

"Merciful Heaven! can it be true? Is Colorado Rube, whom I always thought an honorable man, really a hunted outlaw and road-agent?"

After leaving the house Broderick strode along toward Bull's Head until Hotspur was left far behind and he was treading the wild country at the base of the peak.

He was in a most vicious mood, and as he went he constantly muttered dark threats against his enemies. He had nothing to say for his friends, for they were of a class like those of a wolf; he had but to fall wounded by the way and his chosen companions would fall upon and tear him in pieces.

At the end of an hour he reached and entered a small cave. To this point he and his two allies had taken Mrs. Ralston, and he was returning to the head-quarters. He had directed that no light should be shown, and the darkness was to be expected, but when he gave the signal agreed upon and received no answer he began to feel apprehension mingled with anger.

Had his allies deserted, or had they fallen asleep?

When he had twice vainly repeated the signal he strode impetuously forward. He called the names of his tools, first in a subdued voice, then loudly.

There was no answer.

"Curse them! if they've betrayed me I'll make them bowl for it!" he grated, between his teeth.

He felt along the wall for a pile of pine splinters left for the occasion, and when he found them he soon had a light. Swinging it to a bright blaze he looked around. Almost the first object he saw was the body of a man.

Striding forward he bent over him; it was one of his tools, dead!

A moan from near at hand told him where to look next, and he saw his second follower. He would follow him no more. It was the dew of death that was on his brow, and he looked up into his employer's face with glazing eyes.

"I'm a-goin' fast!" he gasped.

"Who killed you?"

"Here! here!" said the man, vaguely, as he put his hand to his side. "It was meant for my heart, an' it went deep. I'm a dyin' man, an'—"

He paused and gasped for breath. Broderick saw there was danger that he would die with his secret untold, and he caught his shoulder and shook him roughly.

"Arouse! arouse!" he shouted. "I say, who did this deed?"

The man clutched at his throat as though the words found difficulty in passing, his lips moved and he uttered three words:

"The Buzzard brothers!"

Then he fell back lifeless in the arms of his employer.

Broderick let the body drop and rose to his feet. His face expressed the rage he felt, but he could not help feeling, even then, that it was fortunate that he was away when the attack came.

"The jig is up on that point!" he muttered, "for I reckon if the Buzzards have got her they won't let her go again. Shall I try for it? I think not—at least, not at present. My purpose is served just as well, if not better, by her being in the hands of the giants. Let her stay there. I'll go back to, or near, Hotspur, and await the arrival of the men from Arizona."

At that same hour there was light in the main room of Buzzard's Roost, and three brothers were seated around a table. It seemed madness for them to venture to their old home, yet there they were. The windows, however, had been so muffled as to hide all evidence of the light, and they relied on the boldness of their move, as their enemies would hardly expect them to venture back, and on one other

fact, the nature of which will be explained anon, to keep them out of trouble.

While they sat there, Bill was absently cutting a rude cross in the table with his knife, and as he did so spots of blood were visible on his wrists. One of the men who had died in the cave owed his fate to Bill, the other to Jack; but the tragedies set lightly on their minds.

"Wal, now's ther time ter decide ther matter," said the eldest brother, breaking a long silence. "We're three, an' thar can't be no tie in ther vote. Shall we hold our own hyar, or desart Sugar-Loaf forever?"

"I say skip!" broke in Jack, emphatically.

"An' I say stay!"

So saying, Bill turned his gaze upon Dave, but that young man did not speak, nor stir, nor show in any way that he had heard what was being said, or understood the inquiring glance.

"What do ye say, Dave?" Bill added.

"Nothin'," was the curt reply.

"Nothin'? That's a purty way ter answer. Did ye hear ther question I put ter ye? I say, shall we leave Sugar-Loaf, or shall we stay hyar an' defy our enemies?"

"You kin do ez you choose; I don't car' a durn!"

With these words, Dave abruptly arose and walked from the room.

"What's got inter that boyee?" Bill demanded. "He's ez ugly ez a sore-headed b'ar; he don't use nobody decent. I don't know what ter make on't."

"Shall I tell ye?" Jack asked, slowly.

"Yas," quickly replied the elder brother.

"He means ter desart us!" was the ready reply.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DAVE BUZZARD'S MISSION.

BILL started and looked keenly at his brother.

"What makes ye think so?" he asked.

"Can't I see it?" asked Jack. "When a man gets ter sulkin', ez he has been lately, an' is so mighty cranky, you kin jest make up yer mind he has got mischief on ther brain."

"An' you think he's goin' ter desart?"

"I do, that."

Bill Buzzard was silent for some time, during which he revolved the matter in his mind and tried to come to a conclusion. He had had some trouble with his youngest brother, as will be remembered, but it had been forgotten by him in the rapidly succeeding events which had since transpired, and he had not contemplated a rupture of the league of three.

"This is a ser'us matter," he finally observed. "Ef he's goin' ter desart, thar must be a reason. What is it?"

"Ef you'll think keerfully, you'll remember he was always a leetle soft. He was too nigh Mona's age ter grow up sturdy o' mind an' sensible like ther rest on us; ther gal softened him."

"Wal,"

"Wal," pursued Jack, "it's my opinion he will yet come out flat footed fur her, an' in favor o' lettin' Rube Ralston go free."

"He'd better not!" said Bill, quickly. "Does he forgit how Tom died? Ef it hadn't been fur Ralston, poor Tom would have been alive now. Dave had better be keerful!"

"I don't want ter do him wrong," said Jack, more seriously, "an' I ask ye not ter be rash. Dave is our brother, an' he's one o' our kind. He stands six foot an' an inch, an' he tips ther scale at two hundred, twenty. an' sech men, without superfluous flesh, ain't common. I'd hate ter know he was a traitor, an' we may drive him to it by bein' hot-headed ourselves. We mustn't. Go slow, Bill, an' we may save him yit."

"We will go slow," said Bill. "But what's he doin' now?"

"He's with Mona, I take it."

"Ef that's so, we must hear what they're sayin'. Foller me!"

They went from the room and to the door of another one where they had confined their sister. As they had suspected, Dave was there, sitting in a chair and sullenly looking at Mrs. Ralston.

"It pains me that we should be enemies, David," the little woman was saying. "You were the only one of my brothers who ever deigned to play with me in our youth, and as our life was such a lonely one, I fairly idolized you. Even when you grew so big and strong, I was proud of you and liked you better than I did all the others—proud of you until you broke loose entirely from me and followed the evil example set by the other boys."

"You'd better not hev been proud on me," said Dave, sulkily. "I ain't no good, nohow."

"You can be of some good, if you will. You have the material of a noble man about you, if you will abandon your wicked ways, and I pray Heaven you will. Dave, there is no knowing to what you'll come if you keep on as you are."

"Ter some bad eend, I hev no doubt," he answered.

"You surely will, unless you reform."

"I can't reform. Thar ain't no good in me."

"I deny it. I am sure you have only to try and you will succeed. Dave, answer me truly, is there human blood on your hands?"

"No!" he answered promptly, but remembering that he would have killed Neal Bishop if he could, there was little consolation to him in the fact.

While she talked, all his thoughts were on Zetta Willis. Could he have won her by reforming he would have tried his best, but he knew it was an impossibility. It was this that made him so persistently sullen and morose.

"Then, I beg of you, change your course while you can. Release me and let us go to Hotspur, and all that Rube and I can do for you shall be done."

Mrs. Ralston spoke quickly and earnestly. She had left her husband hovering between life and death; each minute away from him at such a crisis was torture; and she had been doing her best to move the heart of her youngest brother.

"Rube would be a fool ter forgive me now."

"He would forgive you. He would do anything to please me, and he would gladly see you a better man. Dave, remember our childhood, have pity and release me!"

She spoke imploringly, but he abruptly arose. "It can't be!" he said, harshly. "I won't think on't. Thar ain't any good in me: I'm all bad. No: I'll stick ter Bill an' Jack ter ther last!"

He moved toward the door so suddenly that his listening brothers barely had time to retreat, and, unheeding her call for him to remain, went out. In the main room he found Bill and Jack apparently as he had left them.

Nothing was said for several minutes, but Bill, who was nearly convinced that Dave was really to be trusted, was forming a plan to test him. He broke the silence at last.

"Jack an' me hev been talkin' about Ralston," he finally said, "an' we hev agreed that ther way ter finish him is not fur us all ter go in a body, but fur one ter go alone an' quietly dispose on him. Now, ther question is, who shall go?"

"Is it?" indifferently asked Dave.

"Yas, an' we hev decided that ther way is ter draw lots, an' ther man ter whom it falls ter go shall kill ther man we all hate—Rube Ralston. What d'ye say?"

"That's all right," answered Dave, as before.

"Ther lottery shall take place at onc't," said Bill, briskly, and he arose and began preparations.

He cut three slips of paper exactly alike, and on one of them he had Dave write the word, "Knife!" Then he arranged them in a book—one of the few things they had to remind them of the old days when Mona was with them—and all was ready for the lottery of death.

He first presented the book to Jack, who drew quickly. The slip of paper was blank. Then he walked toward Dave.

"It lays between us two," said he, looking keenly at the youngest brother.

Dave did not change expression, and his hand was steady as he drew. He held up his paper.

"Knifel" he said, laconically and indifferently.

He had, indeed, drawn the fatal ballot.

"Be you ekul to it, Dave?" asked Bill, slowly.

"Ekul ter what?"

"Ther job."

"I reckon I be," was the stolid reply.

"Cause I'll take ther job off yer hands, ef ye say so."

For the first time the youngest giant showed some interest. He raised his gaze to Bill's face, half-fiercely.

"D'ye think I'm afeerd," he demanded.

"No, but I'm ther oldest—"

"It don't foller you're ther best man. No; I've drawn ther paper, an' I'll go. Rube Ralston dies!"

He spoke firmly, though without any other trace of feeling, and Bill was jubilant.

"He's all right!" the eldest brother thought.

"He's true, an' he's chock-full o' sand!"

The doctor's sanguine hopes in regard to Colorado Rube was not fully realized. On the following day he seemed to have nearly recovered his old strength, but his mind was under a cloud. All day he sat in his room and took no interest in public or private affairs. He labored under the idea that his wife had gone to a neighboring town on a visit, and was safe, and that, as he expressed it, "Mumford had given him a vacation."

His friends feared the worst.

The search for Mrs. Ralston never flagged, but, with Apollo Abe for the directing power, Bull's Head and Sugar-Loaf were searched as thoroughly as possible. Twice, Apollo Abe went to the Roost, but he found no sign of the Buzzards.

In the afternoon, too, he visited Pine-Apple, a small village at the junction of the Deerfield and Long Meadow trails, for the population was made up of notorious roughs and it was thought the hunted men might have gone there.

Night settled, however, and left them as much in doubt as ever.

Late in the evening Ralston showed a spark of his old resolution, but it was exercised in dismissing his would-be attendants, and he went to bed. The doctor directed that he should be

left alone, and the exhausted watchers themselves sought rest.

The mayor soon fell into a slumber far more peaceful and natural than he had yet enjoyed since his injury, and could the man of medicine have seen him then he would have been freshly encouraged.

Two hours passed. The clock on the shelf, lighted by the lamp which stood unextinguished on the table, indicated eleven o'clock. The hand went steadily on and passed the hour.

Then the door was softly pushed ajar. A pause followed. Again the door was moved. Then a human face appeared in the opening—the face of Dave Buzzard!

He looked at the sleeping mayor and then glided softly through. For one of his size, his movements were singularly soft and cautious. He glanced carefully around the room. He was alone with the unconscious man.

The plot of the Buzzard brothers was working well.

He moved carefully to the bedside and looked down on the calm face before him. Rube's chest arose and fell regularly, and no shadow of the danger which menaced him was on his face.

Dave Buzzard's expression was fixed and dogged. He showed no actual ferocity, but it was plain he was resolved to do the work set for him.

Slowly he drew a long, glittering knife. He did not need to look at it; he knew its material well. He marked the spot where he knew Rube's heart to be, and then slowly raised the knife.

It became stationary and there paused. Seconds glided past and became a full minute, but he did not strike. The dogged expression on his face became one of doubt and bewilderment.

Then he slowly lowered his hand and brushed the other across his eyes. Was it his fancy, or had the face of his sister—the face of Colorado Rube's wife, come between him and his intended victim?

He felt that he had imagined it all, but the power it exerted was not to be easily defied. His expression became troubled, and twice he again essayed to lift his knife and failed.

The third time it came up quickly, for he was resolved not to give himself time to think. It arose above his head, and he tried to nerve himself for the assassin deed, but instead his hand again fell by his side.

"I can't!" he whispered hoarsely. "Mona's face is here. I can't!"

He paused and started violently. A human hand had been laid upon his arm.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FATE!

DAVE BUZZARD wheeled with all his powers thrilled into new life. The memory of his sister had been too powerful to allow him to kill her husband in such a cowardly way, but he thought Apollo Abe or some other man had discovered him, and it changed him to a tiger.

Instead, he saw Zetta Willis.

The face of the girl was very pale, but she confronted him unwaveringly. She had seen nearly all the visible signs of the inward struggle through which he had passed; she had watched at first too frightened to stir, and then with a dawning realization of the truth; and it had occurred to her that the way to save Rube Ralston was not to make an outcry, but to meet Dave Buzzard with the weapons of the same power already at work.

When he saw her the fierce look faded from his face and one of consternation took its place. He could have fought a man without a sting of conscience, but in the presence of the woman he vainly loved he was dumfounded.

"You—you are Mona's brother!" said Zetta, herself far from being calm.

His lips moved twice before a word passed them.

"Yes," he finally said, hoarsely.

"Have you come as a messenger from her?"

A sudden light flashed into Dave's eyes. Could he tell a falsehood and hide the truth from Zetta? A moment's thought showed him the folly of trying. She had seen him standing over Rube, knife in hand.

"You know why I come," he said, gloomily. "You seen me!"

"I am sure you would not harm Mr. Ralston."

He did not answer; his eyes were cast down; but she saw shame, regret and remorse expressed on his face.

"I did see you," she added, "but I also saw you battle with the tempter and conquer. You would have harmed him, but your nature was too noble for that."

"Don't call me noble!" he exclaimed. "I'm mean, an' low, an' vile. Don't speak kind ter me; I ain't fit ter tech ther hem o' yer garments."

"You are Mona's brother," said the girl, steadily, though she was far from calm; she felt that she was fighting a battle where more than one life was at stake; "and she has always said your heart was good. I am sure you will do Ralston no harm."

"You're right," he answered. "I come hyar ter kill him, but Mona's face come atween us two. I couldn't do it. I'm goin' away: away from temptation, but Colorado Rube is safe!"

He had turned aside, and she had no desire to stop him. They went from the room together, but, outside the door, he paused and turned again to her. A tempest was raging within him, but it was not of a form that boded harm to Zetta. Instead, he would not have lifted a hand against her.

"I have one question to ask," said the girl, slowly.

"Yas."

"Where is Mona?"

It was the most unwelcome one of all. Dave had given up his vendetta, and he had then and there resolved to leave Hotspur, and all who knew him, and begin a new life in a strange place, but he felt that it would be cowardly to betray his brothers. He resolved to lie on this subject at least.

"Bill an' Jack hev her somewhar," he said, "but I don't know whar. I've broken with them; they an' me is nothing ter each other. You kin tell ther people that ther boyees has her, but they must find her; I can't. I'm goin' away from this region never to return."

He had made his first statement in such a way that Zetta felt sure he had not been telling the truth, but, before she could question him further, the last sentence was spoken with a subdued vehemence which startled her.

"Going away?" she repeated. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know, an' it don't make no difference; but I wanten say one thing afore I go. Ef it hadn't been fur you, I'd be a murderer now!"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been a hard ticket, an' all Mona's teachin's couldn't keep me from follerin' Bill's lead. I war never r'ally touched until I saw you. Then my hull life changed; I loved you. Thar, thar! don't start, gal; you ain't in no danger, an' in a minute I'll be gone. Yas, I loved you, an' though I tried ter steal you, an' kill them as befriended you, ther work went on steadily. I seen I was softenin', an' it made me mad, but that didn't stop ther river that was started. It went on, on, on!"

The young giant paused, breathing heavily, while Zetta looked at him in speechless wonder.

"Ter-night ther eend is reached," Dave went on, in a husky voice. "I stood over Ralston, resolved ter kill him, but I thought o' Mona an' o' you, an' I couldn't do it. Ther course o' my life is changed. I'm done with Bill an' Jack, an' I'm goin' away an' live ez a man arter this, but it'll be all on account o' you—all fur you!"

She understood at last what was in his heart, as well as the fact that he did not hope for her love in return, and she softly gave him her hand.

"May Heaven aid you to keep your resolve!" she said.

His broad hand closed convulsively over her little one, he looked for a moment into her face with eyes in which were expressed many and indescribable emotions; then he raised her hand to his lips, released it and spoke three words:

"God bless you!"

At the last he wheeled, and, before she could speak again, his dying footsteps told that he was gone.

The following morning Mayor Ralston awoke in full possession of his mental faculties. It had been a combination of circumstances, resulting from his fall and the Independence Hall fire, which had prostrated him, but his fine constitution had triumphed over all and he might well have said: "Richard is himself again!"

His first step after thus recovering was to look for John Broderick, for he had not forgotten the attempt on his life, but that man was not to be found.

Colorado Rube held a consultation with Apollo Abe, Makepeace Mullin, Neal Bishop and Cyrus Mumford, and then took the trail alone to find his wife.

Abe would gladly have accompanied him, but Rube preferred to go alone, and the blonde man, Bishop and Mullin made a second party which went to operate on their own judgment to the same end. Neal was winning the good opinion of nearly every one by his manliness, but they did not know all that was in his mind.

While all this was being done, Broderick was not far away, but he deemed it prudent to keep out of sight for awhile. He had strong hopes the men from Arizona would arrive that day, and when they came he could emerge from private life and triumph over his hated enemy.

Unconscious of the cloud gathering over him, Colorado Rube set out alone to search for his wife. The event recalled the earlier and wilder days of his life, and when once on the way the circulation of his blood seemed to change and he became like a bloodhound in his intensity.

His keen eyes saw everything by the way, each nerve was strained to its utmost, but, at the same time, he was cool, calculating and wary.

Sugar-Loaf and Bull's-Head furnished many hiding-places, but he was resolved to win. He

believed Mrs. Ralston was concealed at one of the two places. There were hard and lawless characters at Pine Apple, but they were a mere handful compared with the population of Hotspur, and he did not believe they would deliberately antagonize the larger place.

First of all the Strong Arm went to Buzzard's Roost, but the place seemed deserted, and he soon left to work other places he had in his mind.

Where were the Buzzards and their captive? The Roost had a secret not known to any one outside the league of three. A sub-cellar connected with the main one. It was cunningly concealed, but, from the cellar proper, a passageway led toward the face of the bald cliff which fronted Silver Run.

Mention has before been made of this cliff. It formed the southwestern extremity of Sugar-Loaf, and was three hundred feet from base to top. A sheer, bare rock it was, of a reddish hue, without bush or grass until the lower level was reached, where a line of trees skirted it like a fringe of beard under a man's chin.

Solid as the cliff seemed, there was a small opening in it at one point; a place dug through by the Buzzards from which they might look-out on Silver Run, Red Flat and the more distant city of Hotspur.

The tunnel from the Roost connected with the opening in the cliff, and when in their secret abode the giant Brothers could survey the surrounding country and themselves be unseen.

At the time when Colorado Rube was searching, as before related, Bill and Jack were in the secret room, with Mona near at hand. She was allowed freedom from bonds, and was well used, though closely watched.

Bill and Jack were in a doubtful frame of mind. The non-appearance of Dave troubled them. What had happened at Hotspur? Had he succeeded in his death-mission, or had he lost his life in the undertaking? Could they have known either of the two suppositions covered the ground they would have been better satisfied then they were, but there was a haunting fear that he had deserted.

Mona, of course, knew nothing of the errand which had taken her youngest brother away, and they conversed in guarded tones to keep her still in ignorance, but they were troubled more than they would admit to each other.

The day wore on, but Dave did not return. Noon came and passed; night approached.

By that time they had agreed that the night must give them some tidings of the missing man. They could bear the suspense no longer, and though there was danger in it, one of them would go out and see what could be learned.

Each claimed the office of danger.

"We'll toss up a dollar for it," said Bill. "Fair is fair, an' ther man that wins, takes his pick. What d'ye say?"

"Agreed."

Bill took a dollar from his pocket and flung it several feet away.

"Heads!" said Jack.

Heads it was, and he promptly announced that he should take his former choice; he would be the one to go to Hotspur.

"O' course you'll be car'ful," said Bill, a trace of feeling in his voice. "Ef harm bez come ter Dave, we're all that's left o' ther Buzzard brothers."

"I'll pull through all right, don't be afeerd," Jack replied.

They continued to talk so earnestly that Mona was forgotten, and when they turned, a disagreeable surprise awaited them. She was gone from the subterranean room. It was more of a surprise than a blow, for they knew no woman's strength could move the barrier that separated the passage from the cellar under the Roost, but they hurried in pursuit.

When they arrived at the barrier a real shock awaited them. It was rolled aside; the way was clear; their captive was gone.

"By ther gods!" cried Bill, "thar's mischief afoot. She never moved that alone; she had help. Mebbe Colorado Rube has been hyar!"

They hurriedly ascended to the house. The door was open, and reckless of consequences they hurried out.

One swift glance they shot around, and then Bill exclaimed:

"Thar they be—Mona an' Ralston. We'll have them yit!"

"Move ter ther left an' we'll run 'em into a trap," said Jack, quickly. "You know ther lay o' ther land thar; we'll force him ter turn at bay or cross ther Death Canyon, an' once over, he'll be whar he can't retreat. Quick, an' we will win ther game an' kill Colorado Rube!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BRODERICK'S HOUR OF TRIUMPH.

BILL BUZZARD caught up a lasso, and both brothers ran to execute the flank movement Jack had suggested. The fugitives saw them coming and increased their speed, but the chances were against them, and, as their pursuers had hoped, they were driven straight toward the Canyon of Death.

This place, which took its sanguinary name

from a tragedy in the old Indian days, was a cleft in the mountain not over seventy feet wide, but its depth was two hundred, and a fall meant death.

Colorado Rube did not lose his presence of mind. He knew the country about the Roost far better than they thought he did, and he had no fears for the result. Night was close at hand, and when it arrived he would show them an unexpected move—if nothing occurred to prevent.

The two parties raced down toward the canyon, and the pursuers were soon so near that they might have used a revolver with some hope of success.

Ralston watched them narrowly, his own Smith & Wesson ready for use. He was an accomplished shot, and he was resolved to have the first chance, if they tried to open a fusillade.

Across the clean-cut canyon lay a huge fallen tree, the trunk of which had often been used as a bridge. It was safe enough to cross, if one used due prudence, but to lose one's footing was to fall two hundred feet on the ragged rocks below.

As they neared the log Ralston saw there was no time to lose, and though his wife was doing nobly, he stooped and caught her up in his arms. Her light weight was as nothing to him. Then he ran along the trunk of the tree.

Bill Buzzard saw that there was danger of all his plans being foiled, and his hand dropped on his revolver. Another idea came to him, however. He uncoiled his lasso with a jerk. In his opinion there was nothing to prevent his noosing the burdened man as he crossed the log, and the desperado was in such a mood that he was ready and anxious to precipitate both of the pair to sure death.

He prepared for the cast.

It was a moment of deep suspense.

Just as Colorado Rube reached the middle of the great rift the lasso came circling toward his head.

In making his calculations Bill Buzzard had forgotten that he had to deal with a keen and wary man. The diameter of the log enabled Rube to run with comparative safety, since he was a steady hand, and as he had continued to watch his enemies, he saw the lasso, and releasing one hand, made a pass to brush it aside.

Luck was with him; the lasso fell harmlessly into the chasm; the Strong Arm of Hotspur passed successfully over the tree bridge. Another moment and he turned at bay, and the giant brothers saw two gleaming revolvers bearing upon them.

"Halt!" cried Colorado Rube. "I hold the bridge. It means death to advance!"

They both halt. He held the "drop," and they knew something about his marksmanship.

"Retreat is ther word," said Bill, quickly. "We hev him in a pen; he can't escape. Let's go back an' wait till dark, an' then we'll hev him somehow, or we'll die a-tryin'."

Jack did not object, and the first part of his plan was at once carried into execution.

In the meanwhile Ralston and his wife retreated to the cover of the rocks.

"I don't know how we are to escape from here," said Mona, anxiously when their first congratulations were over. "It is a perfect pen."

The Strong Arm smiled quietly.

"Don't believe it," he said. "When I was wooing you against the will of your numerous brothers, I did not fail to make good use of my eyes, and when it is dark I'll lead you safe to the bottom of the canyon, from which point we can easily return to Hotspur. Among the wild mass of rocks there is a path which leads down as I have said, though it is so much after the corkscrew style that it is no wonder you are ignorant of the fact. Have no fear; we will yet escape."

Bill and Jack, in the meanwhile, retreated to a point near the Roost and waited for night.

"What's ther plan?" Jack asked.

"I'll tell ye. I don't b'lieve Ralston will stay long whar he is; he's jest bull-headed enough ter recross ther log an' try ter run ther gantlet; but we'll help him out. One o' us will cross ther kenyon funder up an' gittin' in his rear, drive him across, whether he will or no; while ther other shall wait hyar in ambush an' settle him when he comes. See?"

"Sertain."

"Which job will you take?"

"You may do ther drivin' out."

"All right. You had better take position in ther path that leads down ther hill, below ther house, but keep yer eyes open ter ther right. Thar is a chance fur him ter sneak along ther edge o' ther cliff an' escape that way."

"I'll look out."

Night soon fell and they prepared for their experiment. Bill went away to drive the fugitives out, and Jack crouched in ambush and waited. Seconds and minutes glided past, and the total became such as to trouble him. Where were Ralston and his wife? Where was Bill? Surely, time enough had elapsed for some sign, if all had gone well. What meant the delay?

There was another long pause, and then Jack became fearful that he was being outwitted. He remembered Bill's caution to watch the top of

the cliff—the sheer rock which fronted Silver Run—and he moved noiselessly in that direction.

Reaching the desired position, he crouched down near the verge of the rock and waited. There was a sound in advance, and he saw a man skulking toward him.

"Rube Ralston!"

He barely breathed the name, and then he braced himself for a struggle. Nearer came the prowler, but the night was so intensely dark he did not see his crouching enemy. Nearer yet, and then Jack bounded up and seized him.

Another moment and they were engaged in a desperate struggle. Back and forth they reeled, clasped in each other's arms, each striving for victory with all his might. Not a word was spoken. Their feelings were too deep for expression, but they fought on like gladiators and the result was beyond the reach of prophecy, so well were they matched.

Unluckily for them, they had forgotten their proximity to the precipice; they did not see they were treading on the threshold of death; no warning came to them, until, suddenly, footing failed them, and they fell downward.

A muffled cry arose in the darkness, and then the two went shooting down Sugar-Loaf's red cliff—down to certain death.

At eight o'clock that evening, ex-Mayor Mumford and Zetta were sitting down to supper when there was a knock at the door and John Broderick and a stranger, a man whose face was deeply bronzed by contact with sun and wind, were seen to be the applicants.

Broderick's face bore an easy smile of triumph, and he proceeded to introduce his companion.

"Mayor Mumford, this is Captain Jack Benner, from Red River Run, Arizona."

Mumford was rather favorably impressed by the appearance of the new-comer, who seemed to be a minor of the better class, and he welcomed him cordially.

"The captain has come on business," Broderick continued, "and as time is precious, I'll give him the floor at once and let him speak. Heave ahead, Benner!"

"The fact is," said that man, somewhat awkwardly, "I've come hyar all ther way from Arizona ter arrest a notorious criminal. Some time ago we had a road-agent down our way who was jest a cuss on wheels, an' he was ther scourge of ther hills all along ther Gila fur many a mile. We knowed him ez Captain Redspur, an' ef I was ter talk all night I couldn't tell ye one-half ther bloodthirsty things he did. Whar he an' his cut-throats roved, thar blood flowed like water. He was bad from ther ground up."

"I can swear to all this," interpolated Broderick.

"We chased him often, an' once we thought we had him fast, but he slipped through our fingers like a greased eel. We had him in jail, an' were busy riggin' a gallows, when I'll be shot ef he—ther man we thought fast in prison—didn't come shootin' down upon us, ridin' a hoss an' holdin' a six in each hand. He went through us like an 'arthquake an' escaped. From that day we have never seen Redspur, but we've been huntin' fur him, an' we've run him ter 'arth at last. He hangs out in your town now."

"Well, you're welcome to him," said Mumford. "We don't want any such citizen. Under what name is he known here?"

"You'll be surprised to learn."

"Possibly. What is it?"

"Rube Ralston!"

Mumford started and looked at his visitor as though he thought him mad.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed.

"I said you'd be surprised."

"But it's not possible."

"If you'll take the trouble to recollect, mayor," said Broderick, "you'll remember receiving a letter signed Warren E. Blaisdell, in which the real character of this ruffian was revealed. I wrote that letter, deeming it my duty to do so, though, as I was working for my Arizona friends, I would not defeat justice by publicly appearing. Did you get the letter?"

"Yes, but I didn't believe the charge then, and I won't believe it now. I am sure Ralston is an honorable man."

"We are prepared to prove all we claim, fur hev Ralston we must," said Benner, moderately. "Me an' five o' my yards have come all ther way from Arizona ter git him. One way we'll prove it is this: on his left arm, half-way between wrist an' elbow, thar should be a long scar ef he is Redspur. It was made when we captured him, as aforesaid."

Broderick looked triumphantly at Zetta. Her face was troubled, the more so because she had seen the scar, but she did not speak.

Just then Neal Bishop entered the room, an eager look on his face. He had been looking for Mildred Fenton, and failing to find her, had come to the conclusion that both she and Broderick had fled from the town.

The latter, however, no sooner saw Bishop, than he stepped quickly forward.

"Here is another man you want, Benner," he

said. "He is Philip Walters, *alias* Neal Bishop, and Red River Run wants him on the charge of murder!"

Neal's face had at first exhibited consternation, but he promptly rallied.

"Keep away, Broderick," he said, sternly. "I am ready to go to Red River Run, but if you lay so much as a finger upon me, I'll shoot you like the dog you are!"

This bold defiance rung out clearly, but it was followed by a calm, even voice.

"Let there be no shooting here!"

And Colorado Rube and his wife entered the room.

They had escaped from the mountain by way of the canyon, and safely returned to Hotspur.

A quick look of recognition passed over Benner's face, and he stepped toward the Strong Arm.

"Rube Ralston, *alias* Captain Redspur," he gravely said, "I arrest you in the name o' the law!"

CHAPTER XL.

CONCLUSION.

THERE was a momentary pause, during which those who looked at Colorado Rube saw a white, tense look on his face, and then a new voice broke in.

"Now, then, Jack Benner, what's the matter with you? I see you are as far off your base as usual."

It was Apollo Abe who spoke, and his voice had never been more cheerful. He had entered in company with Mullin.

"I don't know you an' have nothing ter do with you," said Benner, sharply. "What I want is Captain Redspur."

"Perhaps you'd like the earth, too."

"I didn't come hyar to be insulted," said Benner, with a glitter in his eyes, "an' I'm not goin' ter be. Mark that down!"

"Down she goes!" said Abe, cheerily. "At the same time I've got a word to say in this case. I've had my eyes open since I came to Hotspur, and I've learned a thing or two. Broderick, you haven't recognized me yet, though I am the man you tried to kill, recently—Colonel Nelson by name. If I had on my black wig and false beard, with my brunette make-up, more than one of you would recognize me. I say I am Colonel Nelson!"

More than one there had recognized him. His voice had undergone a change, and Broderick and Colorado Rube, at least, knew he was the genuine Nelson. He gave them no time to speak, but rapidly continued:

"You are a prince of villains, Broderick, but you slip up now and then. You decoyed me toward Bull's Head and tried to kill me, and I fell into a chasm and nearly lost my life. Luckily for me, there was another wayfarer there. A man named Dave Buzzard had had a fight with still another man"—here he glanced at Neal Bishop—"and got tumbled into the same hole. It was of such a nature that one man could not get out alone, but we helped each other, and, when clear, swore secrecy."

"Buzzard was wounded and went home in a demoralized condition, but I was right side up with care, and I formed the resolution of dropping on Hotspur in disguise to see the game my good friend Broderick was playing. So I became Apollo Abe, and I have learned a thing or two."

Thus far the blonde man had spoken in a rollicking voice, but at this point he turned more seriously to Neal.

"Broderick tells you that you are a murderer; that you killed a man at Red River Run, and circumstances have made you believe it. Broderick lies. You loved a girl, and Broderick told you she had another lover. He poured liquor down your throat and got you desperate. You laid for your supposed enemy, fought him, and thought you had killed him. You did not, and the joke of it is, he thought he killed you, and his conscience has troubled him as much as yours did you. It's a mixed-up affair, which I lack time to explain, but the man you did *not* kill is Rube Ralston. Compare notes and you'll find I tell the truth."

There was a look of eager hope on Bishop's face and that of Ralston, but Broderick broke in fiercely:

"It's a lie! I can prove—"

"Oh! you dry up!" interrupted Apollo Abe. "I can settle your hash in a few rounds. Black Burke, Crooked Briggs, or whatever you see fit to call yourself, you have no show here; but there's a man outside will take charge of you when I disband my circus. He's a sheriff, and you're wanted in St. Louis for murder!"

Broderick turned ghastly pale and dropped back into a chair, trembling like a leaf.

"That's right," laughed the blonde man. "I reckon we won't see any more of your brashness. Mildred Fenton, your accomplice, has fled from Hotspur, and it's just as well. Ralston, the letter by means of which she gained entrance to your house was a forgery. I never wrote it. Broderick did the work, and it was his game to ruin your home because he thought you killed his brother in Arizona. Well, Captain Redspur *did* kill him—and very properly,

too, for the brother was a villain, a sneak and a traitor—but Redspur and Ralston are not one."

Apollo Abe now turned to Benner.

"Jack Benner, captain and sheriff," he serenely said, "if you want Captain Redspur, look this way. *I am he!*"

The man from Arizona started back.

"You!" he exclaimed.

"I, said Cock Robin," the blonde man replied, with his most cheerful laugh. "It's a surprise, isn't it, Jack, old boy? Bless your dear soul—excuse my familiarity, but your face brings back the old days so vividly that I feel like clasping you in my arms. True, we were not on good terms; you had a disagreeable habit of hunting me pell-mell over wide Arizona with your lynchers; but I love you as an actor in the merriest scenes of my life. Yes, I'm Captain Redspur."

"I'll briefly describe how you got my identity mixed with that of Ralston. You were chasing me one day when you dropped on him. Not knowing my face—no man knew it, as I kept it masked—you thought you had me. You took Ralston, but not until you had given him a bad wound on the arm, between wrist and elbow. You prepared to bang him, but as you will remember, you didn't. No!"

"Your plans were known to me, and I disguised myself as 'Colonel Nelson,' which was one of my many roles, and gained entrance to the jail. I liberated Ralston, telling him I was a romantic old fossil, wandering over the West to gain material for a book on geology and the like. I got him out of the way, and then, throwing off my disguise, mounted my brown mare, and swept down upon your crowd, Benner, as you will remember."

"That was my last appearance as a road-agent. Matters had become rather sultry in Arizona, so I prepared to quit the life. I have no excuses to make for having been in it, but I will say that the yarns which represented me as a murderous cut-throat were all pure lies. I robbed, but I never killed unless driven to it."

"I met Ralston when in my disguise as Colonel Nelson twice after that, and as he appreciated my aid in saving him from Judge Lynch he was duly grateful. I hereby declare he is not Captain Redspur and never was. When in Arizona he was perhaps a little wild, like a good many other men, but he has a clean record."

"Even Broderick's grudge against him falls flat. Broderick hated Captain Redspur for killing his brother. Well, I'm Redspur, and when Broderick gets out of his St. Louis scrape I'll settle with him."

"Unless you've lied ter us, you've got a scrape o' your own ter get out of," said Benner.

"How's that?"

"Arizona wants Captain Redspur for ther gallus."

"Oh! that'll be all right; Arizona can have the earth, if she'll raise her warble to that effect," said Apollo Abe, with his old laugh. "How say you, Ralston and Bishop, are you happy in mind now you see yourselves out of the drag?"

"I am for one," said Colorado Rube, starting forward, "and, as mayor of this city, I earnestly request clemency in the case of Captain Redspur—"

"Don't do it!" interrupted that man. "My dear old friend, Benner, and I, will settle that point. He has only to take me. Benner, here's a go!"

Again the blonde man laughed, but at the last word he wheeled and shot from the room. Benner followed in close pursuit, regretting that he had left his men at the Old Rye Hotel, but when he passed the door he saw Apollo Abe mounted on a horse and speeding away.

He turned and waved a mocking farewell, and that was the last Benner ever saw of him.

The men from Arizona pursued, but Hotspur remained neutral.

Colorado Rube and his wife, Neal Bishop and Zetta, were happy. From two of them dark clouds had been swept away, and they saw that they could henceforth walk among their fellow-men and fear nothing from the past.

The following day two bodies were found side by side at the foot of Sugar-Loaf's red cliff. They were those of Bill and Jack Buzzard. The former had gone in search of Colorado Rube and his wife, beyond the Canyon of Death, only to find them gone. He was cautiously searching for them when he chanced upon Jack, who, it will be remembered, had changed his position.

In the intense darkness each of the brothers mistook the other for Ralston, and they engaged in that desperate struggle before described.

When they fell over their fate was sealed, and they died together at the base of the cliff. The same day Mrs. Ralston received a note, which was as follows:

"MONA:—I tho't mebbe you'd like ter know what become of me, so I wright this to say I am about to leave Hotspur forever. I hav' found out that your advis' was best, and that your way of livin' was best; and I'm goin' away an' try to live like a man. I won't say I'm sorry, for I may backslide, but I

hope you'll be happy with Ralston. I hav' tried to think of a word ter send to Zetta, but I can't. Only ask her to remember what I sed when I saw her last, an' feel that I am her friend. Ef you ever heer from me ag'in, it won't be as a murderer."

"DAVE BUZZARD."

Colorado Rube and his wife are happy; no clouds are on their lives now. He is still the mayor, and the Strong Arm of Hotspur City, and all men honor him. Cyrus Mumford and Makepeace Mullin are two of his fellow-citizens, and they never tire of sounding his praise.

Zetta has become the wife of Neal Bishop—or, to give him his real name, Philip Walters—and they, too, are prosperous and happy.

Nothing is known of the fate or whereabouts of Mildred.

John Broderick was taken to St. Louis, but he evaded justice by committing suicide in his cell.

Benner and his men went back to Arizona without Apollo Abe, for that man had vanished completely; they could gain no clew to his whereabouts.

Of Dave Buzzard, the last of the giants of the Roost, we may possibly hear again, but his subsequent experience does not belong to this story.

THE END.

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